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The Practice of Assessment Data Use in Student Affairs: The Need for an Expanded Conceptualization

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THE PRACTICE OF ASSESSMENT DATA USE IN STUDENT AFFAIRS: THE NEED FOR AN EXPANDED CONCEPTUALIZATION

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ABSTRACT

The main purpose of the current study is to describe the practice of assessment data use in student affairs. Through a single instrumental case study research design, this study explored the practice of assessment data use in higher education by specifically focusing on a single university's division of student affairs with an established culture of assessment and an assessment process that has been in place for the past fifteen years. This dissertation centers on staff members' perception and experience with how assessment data are used within a student affairs organization at a large four-year, non-profit private university in the Midwest. This study explored assessment use via interviews with student affairs staff members at various levels of the organization, as well as document analyses of assessment reports to discover how the concept of data use or influence has been applied. This study applied a conceptual framework of use including the practice of data use (Coburn & Turner, 2012) process mechanisms of use (Henry & Mark, 2003), and integrated theory and model of data influence (Jonson, et al., 2015; Kirkhart, 2000) to examine the broader conceptualization of assessment data use. This study specifically examined how staff directly charged with leading assessment efforts, both divisionally and at the department level, have made meaning of and applied the spectrum of assessment data use. This study also explored how the culture, structure, and processes embedded within the organization affect how student affairs staff move from data collection to forms of application and assessment data use with the intention of informing or improving practice.

This study contributes to the field of student affairs by providing contextual evidence of the various forms of assessment data use, as well as by providing insight into the factors that affect *use* through various organizational structures and processes. The findings from this study illuminate the need for practitioners to not only broaden their paradigm of assessment data use, but also mitigate the limitations that might affect the practice of data use in student affairs.

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

In the changing economic, political, and social climate of higher education, colleges and universities have faced increased scrutiny by legislators, parents, and employers as to the value of a college degree. This is especially true given the surging cost of attendance and the perceived deficiencies for colleges and universities to provide students with holistic skills necessary for today's workforce (Hamrick & Klein, 2015; Volkwein, 2009). One of the primary ways that higher education has tried to respond to this critique is through assessment of the student experience and ultimate outcomes of what students are learning inside and outside the classroom (Hamrick & Klein, 2015). Colleges and universities face higher expectations, and thus increased pressure, from regional accrediting agencies to not only have assessment mechanisms in place, but to also demonstrate how that evidence has been used to inform practice, curriculum, and policy (Baker, Jankowski, Provezis, & Kinzie, 2012; Principles for Effective Student Achievement, 2013). More broadly, the question of how assessment data is being used by individual colleges and universities has become a point of ongoing discussion. Thus, the topic of assessment data use in higher education served as the focus of this dissertation. This chapter serves as an introduction to the current study and provides an overview of the background and scope of the topic and study parameters. Before delving into the historical context of assessment in higher education and the empirical challenges related to assessment data use both in higher education and in student affairs, it is important to first acknowledge how the language of assessment impacts the actual application of assessment and data use.

Language of Assessment

While the importance of language and a deeper review of the meaning behind concepts of assessment and use will be unpacked in greater detail in Chapter 2, it is essential to frame the central terms within this proposed study by providing brief overarching definitions. Though assessment has many meanings depending on the frame of reference for the reader (Banta & Palomba, 2015), multiple scholars have helped to define assessment in higher education (Astin 1991; Banta & Palomba, 2009; Suskie, 2012; Walvord, 2010). Assessment in higher education can thus be defined as the intentional and systematic process to collect, describe, analyze, and use information about institutional, divisional, or program effectiveness in order to improve the student experience. This dissertation will focus specifically on the concept of assessment data *use*.

Patton (2012) defines *use* in the context of evaluation as the application of findings, or stakeholders' experience conducting an assessment/evaluation project, to inform the evaluator's work and/or decision-making. Use also has been described as closing the loop, referring to the last step in the cycle of assessment (Banta & Blaich, 2010). The concept of use is also framed within the idea of data use as an interactive process that occurs in a situated group context (Coburn and Turner, 2012). Language around the term *data use* is nuanced and plays a central role in shaping this study.

A primary challenge with the concept of *use* is that the word inherently brings about images of change or direct correlations between the results of what has been collected in specific assessments to program and policy improvements at the departmental and institutional level. Essentially, data use as it pertains to assessment under this paradigm could be equated with the word *change*. An important consideration of this proposed study is whether terms such as *utilization*, *use*, and *influence* appropriately describe what is being done with assessment results post data collection, analysis, and interpretation. Some scholars advocate for a broader conceptualization of data use in order to truly understand the impact of evaluation and assessment results (Henry & Mark, 2003; Jonson, Guetterman & Thompson, 2015; Kirkhart, 2000). Use of assessment results can be viewed on a continuum that incorporates both immediate and longer-term impact on both the individual and on various levels of an organization (Henry & Mark, 2003; Jonson, Guetterman, & Thompson, 2015; Kirkhart, 2000).

Kirkhart (2000), Henry and Mark (2003), and Johnson, Guetterman, and Thompson (2015) all emphasize the need to reconsider how language informs the concepts of utilization, use, and influence and how narrow definitions have led to less empirical evidence about the scope of impact of assessment. However, they also suggest new ways to conceptualize and expand the construct of data *use* to be that of data *influence*. Such a shift may have implications for better understanding the impact of evaluation and assessment. What assessment use looks like and how it is enacted is critical to understanding the role of the assessment movement in higher education and, more specifically, the field of student affairs.

Background of the Problem

Assessment Movement in Higher Education

Over the past three decades the assessment movement has matured within higher education and assessments have become a more established function within the university setting

(Elkins, 2015; Ewell, 2002; Henning & Roberts, 2016). Hamrick and Klein (2015) identify assessment as one of the most important evolutions in higher education that has affected student affairs as a profession. While the "unofficial" birth of the assessment movement in higher education occurred in 1985 with the convening of the First National Conference on Assessment in Higher Education, assessment had been emerging in higher education since the 1970s (Astin, et al., 1996; Ewell, 2002). Within that movement, assessment of student learning specifically has become a high priority within the national agenda for college and universities, accrediting agencies, and the U.S. Department of Education (Kuh, Jankowski, Ikenberry, & Kinzie, 2014; Principles for Effective Student Achievement, 2013). Thus, the emphasis on student learning outcomes in higher education has become apparent through a number of publications focusing on assessing student learning (e.g., Bresciani, Zelna, & Anderson, 2004; Bresciani, Moore Gardner, & Hickmott, 2009; Keeling, 2004, 2006; Kuh, Jankowski, Cain, Ewell, Hutchings, & Kinzie, 2015; Maki, 2004; Suskie, 2012) as well as the creation of the National Institute for Learning Outcomes Assessment (NILOA), an initiative between the University of Illinois at Urbana Champaign and Indiana University. NILOA has a goal of understanding how colleges and universities use assessment data (Baker, et al., 2012).

Throughout the assessment movement there has been an ongoing and continuing tension about whether *continuous improvement* or *accountability* is the central aim of assessment in higher education (Bresciani, et al., 2009; Ewell, 2008; Kuh, 2009; Keeling, Wall, Underhile, & Dungy, 2008). That tension has implications for how assessment has been framed by university leadership and received by those charged with collecting assessment data, as well as how the results have been used for varying purposes. Additionally, as the assessment movement has evolved, a shift has occurred in the field of higher education as to what is expected by university faculty and staff in providing evidence of student learning (Principles for Effective Assessment of Student Achievement, 2013). It is important to not only understand what has been learned through the process of assessment, but also how assessment results may influence and inform decisions, or assist in making improvements or changes to programs and policies on college campuses.

Student Affairs Assessment

With the evolution of assessment in higher education came the specialization of assessment in various areas within the university setting. It has been nearly two decades since Upcraft and Schuh (1996) advocated the need within student affairs for “high quality and comprehensive assessment programs” (p.4). Since then, there has been a proliferation of dedicated student affairs positions where the primary function is to lead divisional or departmental assessment efforts (Elkins, 2015; Elling & Bentrim, 2013). Within the field of student affairs, assessment as a functional area is quite young, though semblances of assessment can be traced back to seminal documents of the student affairs profession (American Council on Education, 1937; 1949). The need for assessment programs within student affairs was further emphasized through the work of national professional associations, which published seminal documents on assessment of student learning in student affairs (American College Personnel Association (ACPA), 1994; Keeling, 2004, Keeling, 2006, Upcraft & Schuh, 1996). This was followed by sets of assessment frameworks and standards also published by student affairs professional associations (American College Personnel Association (ACPA), 2006; National Association of Student Personnel Administrators (NASPA), 2009). Student affairs organizations within colleges and universities heeded this call. The specialized functional area of student affairs assessment began to emerge, with staff members hired to lead such efforts as their main responsibility on the campus. With this new specialized assessment role in student affairs, as well as an expected general assessment competency for student affairs professionals, came publications specific to assessment in student affairs (e.g. Bresciani, et al., 2009; Bresciani, et al., 2004; Culp & Dungy, 2012; Henning & Roberts, 2016; Keeling, 2004, 2006; Keeling, et al., 2008; Phillips Bingham, Bureau, Garrison Duncan, 2015; Schuh, 2015; Schuh & Associates, 2009; Schuh, Biddix, Dean & Kinzie, 2016; Upcraft & Schuh, 1996; Yousey-Elsener, Bentrim, & Henning, 2015) which focused on describing the role of assessment as a process and operationalizing the steps and methods in conducting effective assessment. A professional association, tailored for those leading divisional assessment initiatives in student affairs, also emerged from a crop of student affairs assessment professionals (Elkins, 2015).

As student affairs divisions have added dedicated staff within their organizations to lead assessment efforts, little is known about the impact of such overall assessment program efforts on divisional or departmental improvement or policy change, or even how staff involved in assessment efforts have benefited. With such growth in this area of specialization, research is needed to examine how the student affairs field can best build a culture of evidence with increasing emphasis around data use and the influence of assessment data. While professionals know that application is part of the process of assessment (Banta & Blaich, 2010), there has not been sufficient evidence of what use of assessment looks like both in higher education and specifically student affairs, or how best practice strategies encourage assessment data use (Kinzie, Hutchings, Jankowski, 2015).

Challenges with Assessment Data Use

According to Jonson, et al. (2015) and Kirkhart (2000), assessment data use has been narrowly defined and is often limited to direct program improvement, often ignoring other forms of data use. This has the potential to cause some colleges and universities to feel that they have not effectively leveraged assessment if their use of assessment data does not lead to programmatic change, even though it may fall into other forms of use such as process (Patton, 2008), conceptual (Weiss, 1977), or symbolic use (Leviton & Hughes, 1981), each of which will be discussed further in Chapter 2.

Over time, the focus of assessment literature has shifted away from articulating the value and purpose of assessment and toward operationalizing and conducting effective assessment (Schuh, 2009). However, while there are normative publications on assessment use and the importance of using assessment data, little empirical evidence exists about how assessment results have been used to influence conversations, improve practice, or inform policy and future assessments. While most steps or cycles of assessment involve the concept of data use, what use looks like and how it is enacted as a critical step of the process has remained elusive, or as Kinzie, et al. (2015) put it, “an unmet promise on many campuses” (p. 51). Concepts such as data-driven or evidence-based decision making have become commonplace in higher education dialogue, and these concepts are often discussed as an outcome of assessment (Spillane, 2012). Yet very little has been written to provide concrete examples of how or if assessment results have influenced decisions. Kinzie et al. (2015) assert that practitioners are begging for examples of effective use of assessment data related to student learning. Hutchings, Kinzie, and Kuh (2015) highlight three obstacles to use:

> (1) evidence isn't accessed by those who could or might use it. (2) evidence of unacceptable performance is known and even acknowledged by those in a position to take action, but they do not. (3) evidence is used but does not lead to real improvement. (p.42-43)

Such obstacles can be disheartening to colleges and universities who invest time, money, and resources into creating assessment structures with the hope of improving student and institutional performance.

Dearth of Research on Assessment Data Use

In addition to assessment in higher education and student affairs being young, and with the complexity of the language of assessment and data use, there is also dearth of empirical evidence related to use of assessment results in higher education and even less within the specific organizational context of student affairs (Coburn & Turner, 2012; Peterson & Augustine, 2000; Peterson & Einarson, 2001). Part of the lack of understanding around the use of assessment stems from a primary base of assessment literature that tends to focus on operationalizing assessment practices in higher education generally (e.g. Banta, Jones, & Black, 2009; Culp & Dungy, 2012; Henning & Roberts, 2016; Keeling, et al., 2008; Phillips Bingham, Bureau, Garrison Duncan, 2015; Schuh, 2015; Schuh & Associates, 2009; Schuh, et al., 2016; Upcraft & Schuh, 1996; Yousey-Elsener, Bentrim, & Henning, 2015) and assessing student learning more specifically (Bresciani, et al., 2009; Bresciani, et al., 2004; Maki, 2004; Suskie, 2012). Far less emphasis, however, has been placed on understanding how to use assessment results in higher education (Coburn & Turner, 2012; Banta & Blaich, 2010, Blaich & Wise, 2010, 2011). Peterson and Einarson (2001) assert that the dearth of empirical evidence on how institutions conduct assessment has a negative impact on institutions. More specifically, Blimling (2013) identified the lack of knowledge surrounding how to effectively use assessment data results as one of the major challenges of student affairs assessment. Further, Banta and Blaich (2010) found that only six percent of the 146 institutional profiles examined in the book *Designing Effective Assessment* (Banta, Jones, & Black, 2009) showed evidence of the use of assessment results. Coburn and Turner (2012) advocate for the importance of understanding data use on a micro level within institutions to see under what conditions data use leads, or fails to lead, to improvement.

The National Institute for Learning Outcomes Assessment (NILOA) published results of two surveys on the issue of institutional use of student learning outcomes assessment results (see Kuh, Jankowski, Ikenberry, & Kinzie, 2014; Kuh & Ikenberry 2009), as well as qualitative case studies about use (see Baker, et al., 2012). While these examinations have included student affairs in the data collection, the emphasis has been on implications at a broader institutional level. Research has also examined the use of individual survey instruments, such as the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) (Ahren, Ryan, & Masa-McKinley, 2008) and the Global Perspective Inventory (GPI) (Engberg, Manderino, & Dollard, 2015). One qualitative case study by Green, Jones, and Aloi (2008) focused on broad student affairs learning outcomes assessment practices. Although one of their research questions did explore data use, the emphasis of the overall study was on a more operational approach to how such assessment is conducted. While assessment literature has grown in recent years, there is a clear lack of robust empirical research on higher education assessment, and even more so on assessment focused on use. Because of this, there is a distinct need for a better understanding of assessment data use, particularly in a student affairs context, and thus an opportunity for this dissertation to contribute to the field.

Statement of the Problem

While data use is a core construct within evaluation literature (Henry & Mark, 2003), as well as an identified construct of the assessment process or cycle, the concept of assessment data use itself, and what that use looks like, has been too narrowly and linearly defined, often equating use of assessment results to direct programmatic and policy changes (Jonson, et al., 2015; Kirkhart, 2000). If applied solely through such a construction, the value of assessment in higher education, and more specifically student affairs, might appear to be lacking (Jonson, et al., 2015). Since the assessment movement began in higher education and student affairs, there was the initial need for literature on operationalizing assessment in order to provide practitioners with resources on how to conduct effective assessment. Now that the movement has matured, a void exists in understanding the overall impact of assessment and, in particular, data use. As Baker et al. (2012) note, many colleges and universities are collecting data on student learning, but it is not clear as to how assessment results are being used. There is a need to understand how student affairs staff members engage in the practice of assessment data use through a more holistic model, which can help inform how assessment has impacted the work of student affairs in various ways.

Purpose and Scope of the Study

Purpose

The purpose of this study is to explore, through a single instrumental case study, the practice of assessment data use within higher education by specifically focusing on a division of student affairs within an established culture of assessment. Peterson and Einarson (2001) suggest a case study approach with an established culture might contribute to best practices. Exploring assessment use in the situated context of student affairs with staff members who collected the data adds to the literature about what the practice of assessment use looks like (Coburn & Turner, 2012). Blaich and Wise (2010) contend that moving from data collection to action is more of a political and interpersonal process than one that is data driven, so exploring this topic through a case study and analyzing staff members' perspective on assessment data use adds to the assessment literature more than focusing on the methodological weaknesses that might impact assessment. More specifically, this study explores student learning outcomes assessment use via interviews with student affairs staff members at various levels of the organization, as well as document analyses of assessment reports to discover how the concept of data use or influence has been applied. This study applies a conceptual framework of use (Coburn & Turner, 2012; Henry & Mark, 2003; Jonson, et al., 2015; Kirkhart, 2000) to examine the broader conceptualization of assessment data use in a division of student affairs, specifically examining how staff directly charged with leading assessment efforts, both divisionally and at the department level, have made meaning of and applied the spectrum of assessment data use, and to examine the impact assessment has had on their organization. This study also explores how the culture, structure, and processes embedded within the organization affect how student affairs staff move from data collection to forms of application of their assessment results with the intention of informing or improving practice.

Research Design and Scope of the Study

Using a case study research design, this study focuses on a single university's division of student affairs and its assessment process, a process that has been in place for the past fifteen years. The case study includes an examination of assessment data use through interviews of student affairs staff members who are engaged in assessment, as well as document analyses of the assessment reports from the same units involved in the interviews. The interviews include individuals from senior leadership, the staff guiding overall student affairs assessment efforts, and divisional staff members at the department level involved in assessment. These interviews facilitate a better understanding of how staff members have been engaged in the practice of data use. Existing department assessment reports, accessed through the student affairs website, were analyzed in order to describe how and to what degree assessment data use has been articulated in their reports. This study was limited to a single case in order to fully delve into an organizational culture of assessment in order to understand how student affairs practitioners have adopted and operationalized assessment data use through a common application of an assessment model at an institution level.

Research Question

This dissertation centers on staff members' perception and experience with how assessment results are used within a student affairs organization at a four-year, non-profit private university. The overarching question guiding this dissertation is: How do student affairs professionals engage in the practice of assessment data use and to what extent do they perceive it as use?

Importance of the Study/Rationale and Significance

There has been a marked proliferation of dedicated assessment positions within student affairs organizations (Elling & Bentrim, 2013), and Hamrick and Klein (2015) identified assessment as one of the major trends that has affected student affairs as a profession. Because of this, research on the topic of assessment use in this organizational context is essential, especially in light of the increased emphasis on assessment and student learning in higher education as a whole. Of those working in student affairs assessment, the majority of these specialized staff are employed at four-year institutions with enrollments of 25,000 students or more, which is similar to the case study site (Elling & Bentrim, 2013). While a qualitative study is not meant to be generalizable, this study does provide insight into the experiences, issues, and challenges of a division of student affairs engaged in assessment. If higher education wants to more fully balance assessment for both accountability and improvement with the goal of data driven decision-making purposes, further research must be conducted to examine evidence of various effective forms of use of assessment data within student affairs (Ewell, 2008; Keeling, et al., 2008; Kuh, 2009, Spillane, 2012).

The significance of this dissertation is to add to the extant empirical literature on assessment use in higher education through a more specific focus on student affairs assessment data use. Coburn and Turner (2012) argue that assessment is one of the most prominent strategies for educational improvement and that by investigating data use as a practice at the ground level, we can gain a better understanding of under which conditions and context use of assessment works or does not work effectively. This study contributes to the field of student affairs by providing contextual evidence of the various forms of assessment data use, as well as by providing insight into the factors that most contribute to such use through various organizational structures and processes. The findings from this study can help practitioners not only broaden their paradigm of data use, but also address the limitations that might affect the practice of data use in student affairs.

Organization of Dissertation

This chapter serves as an introduction to the dissertation study. Chapter 2 provides a literature review informing the topic of assessment use, while Chapter 3 lays out the methodology and research design for the study. Chapter 4 frames the relevant findings from the case, and lastly Chapter 5 provides an overarching discussion of the findings alongside implications and recommendations for practitioners and future research on the topic.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW & FRAMEWORK

It is important to frame the current study through a review of the literature within the context of student affairs assessment and the practice of data use, and also within the larger landscape of assessment in higher education and broader field of evaluation. The focus of this literature review is primarily on higher education assessment literature post 1985, which is generally seen as the start of the assessment movement (Ewell, 2008). The value of this literature review is further enhanced by being based on an evaluation of literature that is empirical, normative, and conceptual in nature, and that is related to the practice of data use both in a broad sense and, more specifically, to the field of higher education. This literature review does not include evaluation literature that focuses on the K-12 education sector or classroom environments, since the focus of the current study is on higher education and student affairs assessment. Before exploring the history of the assessment movement within higher education and student affairs, it is valuable to first begin by defining the concepts central to this study. This also allows us to unpack how language around terms such as *assessment*, *evaluation*, and *use* affects their application. This language, which has been adopted over time, impacts the ways in which practitioners contextualize these terms within their understanding, and also influences the approach they might take when conducting assessment. This in turn influences how practitioners view the impact of the assessment on the programs, services, and policies within their respective campuses.

Language of Assessment, Evaluation, and Use

In this section, the key concepts guiding this dissertation are reviewed by presenting central definitions and term clarification for *assessment*, *evaluation*, and *use*. Depending on the audience with whom the word *assessment* is discussed, as well the sector in which they work, or what level of education (K-20) they are associating assessment within, *assessment* has many definitions and is understood in various ways. Based on the lens from which that person is viewing it, the concept of *assessment* has become politically charged, particularly in the K-12 accountability-driven sector (Banta & Palomba, 2015; No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, P.L. 107-110, 20 U.S.C. § 6319 (2002)). Kirkhart (2000) and Patton (2000) both assert that the language selected and applied when discussing and framing evaluation shapes perceptions and understanding of evaluation, thus informing how the concept of data use is applied in action. Patton (2000) captured the role of language well by saying,

> The evaluation language we choose and use, consciously or unconsciously, necessarily and inherently shapes perceptions, defines 'reality,' and affects mutual understanding. Whatever issues in evaluation we seek to understand—types of evaluation, methods, relationships with stakeholders, power, use—a full analysis will lead us to consider the words and concepts that undergird our understandings and actions, because language matters. (p. 15)

For this reason, exploring the language, terms, and definitions used for evaluation and assessment and data use are critical to shaping this dissertation.

Defining Assessment and Evaluation

Some definitions of assessment focus on describing data as an aspect of the process, while others emphasize the use of data to inform decisions. Thus, the term *assessment* may be interpreted quite differently, encompassing very different aims based on the lens of the reader (Banta & Palomba, 2015). A commonly cited definition of assessment in higher education is, "any effort to gather, analyze, and interpret evidence which describes institutional, divisional, or agency effectiveness" (Astin, 1991, p. 4). While this definition focuses on the description or reporting of effectiveness, Astin (1991) posits that there are two primary components of assessment: the gathering of information (i.e., measurement component) and the use and application of information for institutional or individual improvement (i.e., the evaluative component). This second component related to use and application is not explicitly included in Astin's (1991) definition.

Building on this notion of improvement, Palomba and Banta (1999) define assessment as "the systematic collection, review, and use of information about educational programs undertaken for the purposes of improving student learning and development" (p.4). This definition incorporates both the words *use* and *improvement* as central aims. Walvord (2010) defines assessment as the systematic collection of information about students/clients to inform decisions, which recognizes assessment as an intentional process where a central purpose of assessment is to aid in decision-making. This definition, and the focus of aiding in decision-making as a central purpose through direct, observable change, will be discussed later in this chapter as a narrow conceptualization of how assessment data is used. Such change may not always be as visible within that paradigm as one might expect or hope. Palomba and Banta (1999) and Suskie (2012) frame their definition of assessment as pertaining specifically to student learning and development. More recently, Banta and Palomba (2015) revised their definition to include a broader application beyond student learning and, while still recognizing assessment as a process, they emphasize assessment being used for the improvement of instruction, programs, and services in higher education. While the purpose of this dissertation is to focus on the *use* of assessment results, a broader exploration of data use on a continuum will be employed to examine how one division of student affairs has engaged in the practice of data use with assessment results.

Assessment is often conflated with *evaluation*, and much of the assessment literature is truly grounded in evaluation work. Banta and Blaich (2011) suggest that practitioners should look to evaluation literature to better understand how to use assessment results. As such, it is important to define evaluation in the context of assessment. Patton (2012) believes that evaluation answers three primary questions: What is happening? (the Description); What do the findings mean? (Interpretation); and, Now what? (Recommendations and action steps for improvement). At its core, evaluation is about making a value judgment about a program's merit, significance, or worth (Mertens, 2010). Beyond data collection, a description of a program or experience being assessed, and the dissemination of results, the evaluative realm of assessment has been reached when assessment cycles move into the latter steps of addressing what improvements can be made as a result of the findings.

When introducing evaluation and its relationship to assessment, it is important to consider the epistemology of evaluation. While philosophical and ideological differences exist, evaluation falls into objectivist or subjectivist categories that influence the approach to evaluation. Objectivism focuses on an evaluation being scientifically objective and subjectivism speaks to the experience of the evaluators (Fitzpatrick, Sanders, & Worthen, 2004). Two paradigms of evaluation that can be considered subjectivist, and that play a role in assessment, are those of utilization-focused evaluation (Patton, 2008) and participant-oriented evaluation (Stake, 1967).

Utilization-focused evaluation places emphasis on the utility and actual use of the evaluation as central to how the evaluation is designed and conducted (Patton, 2008). Participant-orientated evaluation focuses on the involvement of the participants and stakeholders in determining criteria, design, data collection, and interpretation of the findings (Fitzpatrick, et al., 2004). Both of these evaluation approaches have an influence on and connection to how assessment is conducted in higher education.

Types of Assessment

Some definitions suggest that assessment can be any type of data gathered, while others are specific to data related to student learning. There are several primary types of assessment: tracking or measuring participation needs assessment, satisfaction assessment, outcomes assessment, climate or environmental assessment, and benchmarking (Henning & Roberts, 2016; Schuh, 2009). Each of the abovementioned types of assessment will be described within the context of Astin's (1991) Inputs-Environment-Outputs (IEO) model. When conducting assessment, Astin's (1991) model suggests taking into account what students bring to their experience in college by examining student inputs. One way to explore student inputs is through a needs assessment. A needs assessment is conducted before a program or service is put in place and involves gathering data to better understand what students need prior to the launch of a new initiative, program, or service in order to preserve resources and create experiences that help to fill a gap identified by students (Henning & Roberts, 2016; Upcraft & Schuh, 1996).

Focusing on the environment or experiences of students, there are a number of assessments types that are in place for practitioners to build their assessment. Satisfaction assessment measures what students think of their experience in order to determine whether the program or service was of high quality, and in order to make improvements (Upcraft & Schuh, 1996). Addressing issues of satisfaction on a more macro level can have implications for improved persistence, retention, and graduation rates. Climate or environmental assessment either explores the conditions of a college campus, physically in terms of space, or culturally based upon the practices, policies, and interactions of the campus community (Schuh et al., 2016; Upcraft & Schuh, 1996). When assessing the student experience, it is often helpful to have comparison data from other institutions to explore how programs and services fare in comparison. Benchmarking involves collecting data in which best practices and comparison groups can be utilized to measure a given program or service against a set of peer groups (Henning & Roberts, 2016; Schuh et al., 2016; Upcraft & Schuh, 1996). Finally, outputs are the outcomes or end results of a student's experience. Outcomes assessment focuses on changes in behavior, student learning, or institutional outcome measures such as grades, retention, or graduation (Upcraft & Schuh, 1996).

Each type of assessment has its place within the student affairs landscape depending on the type of data that is collected and analyzed. The case in this dissertation study focused on outcomes-based assessment initiative and more specifically on student learning outcomes.

Use versus Utility

At the center of this study is the concept of assessment data use. Often in literature, the terms *utility* and *use* are applied interchangeably. Patton (2012) clearly distinguishes the two concepts using a front-end planning and back-end application paradigm. Utility in the context of evaluation is about the probability of use and intended usability of evaluation or assessment results (i.e., front-end planning), whereas *use* is focused on whether the stakeholders involved in the evaluation or assessment actually apply the findings and their experience conducting a project to inform work or decision making (i.e., back-end application). Patton (2012) also describes *use* as a process, as opposed to a report, which is sometimes seen by administrators as the tangible product of *use*. This dissertation seeks to explore the latter—actual assessment use as an interactive process. While many assessment plans focus primarily on data collection, a well-structured assessment plan will place more emphasis on post-data collection activities and the interpretative application of assessment results (Blaich & Wise, 2010, 2011) or, as Coburn and Turner (2012) refer to it, the *practice* of data use.

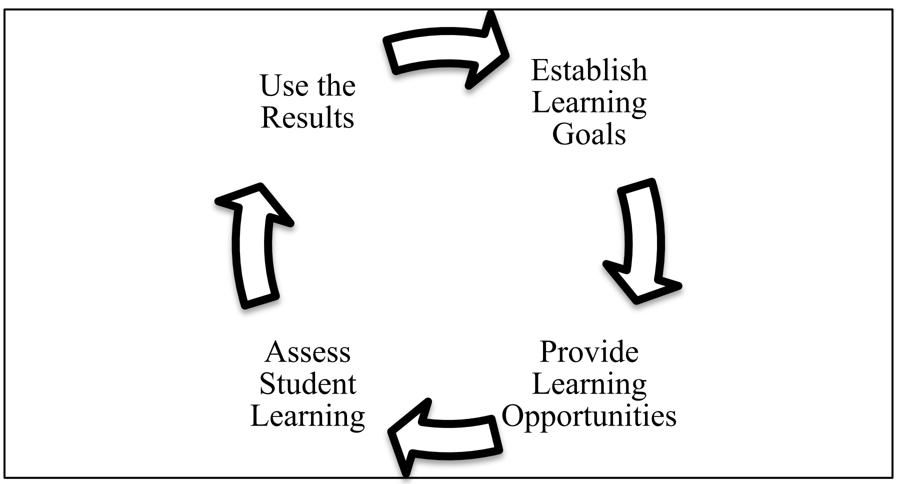
Practice of Data Use

Addressing some of the gaps in the literature on use of assessment or evaluation results in education, Coburn and Turner (2012) introduced an alternative approach to empirical work on data use that focuses on the practice of data use, which investigates what occurs when practitioners interact with data and how that affects change. The authors do not specifically discuss data in the context of assessment or evaluation; rather they focus on data collectively. This idea of *practice* is further defined as "the coordinated activities of individuals and groups in doing their 'real work' as it is informed by a particular organizational or group context" (Cook & Brown, 1999, pp. 386-87). According to Coburn and Turner (2012), the three components of research that focuses on the practice of data use are: data use that is conceptualized as an interactive experience; the connection between the role of the organizational and group context and how that data use occurs in that environment; and how data use is studied in its situated context. Each of these features lends themselves well to the case study methodology of this study.

Data use as an interactive experience is an important feature, as some assessment structures in higher education have a single individual charged with leading assessment at a divisional or departmental level. When it comes to data use, however, such roles must involve groups of people interpreting the meaning and implications of the assessment (Coburn & Turner, 2012; Kinzie et al., 2015). The second feature of research in this paradigm of practice is a consideration of the institutional environment role and how the organization influences or inhibits the practice of data use (Coburn & Turner, 2012). It is critical to consider the influence of the organization, what the organization values when it comes to assessment, how data use is framed, and what organizational factors either encourage or inhibit the practice of data use. Lastly, researchers in this tradition also study *use* in a situated context, exploring how it plays out in a particular environment (Coburn & Turner, 2012). Coburn and Turner (2012) point out that data use is complex and multi-leveled. Research in this tradition must explore the practice of data use at multiple levels of the organization (Kinzie, et al., 2015; Cousins, 2003; Henry & Mark, 2003). While this study explored the practice of data use at a single institution, the phenomenon was examined at multiple levels within the organization including assessment project facilitators, departmental administrators, divisional assessment professionals, and an associate vice president. What the practice of data use looks like might differ depending on the level of the organization that is being explored. Coburn and Turner (2012) suggest that such research can explain the following: (1) the 'how and why' within the process of data use; (2) the organizational factors—activities and structures that foster data use and those that do not; (3) the relationship between the micro- and macro-level; and (4) how data use at departmental levels can potentially influence the entire organization either for better or worse. As will be discussed in Chapter 3, the framework of data use as a practice supports the constructivist methodology used in the case study approach of this study.

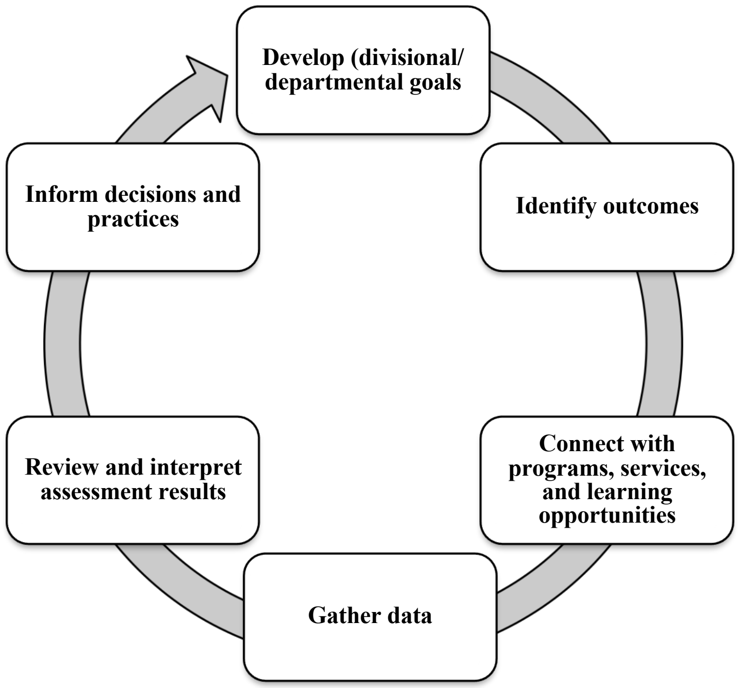
Banta and Blaich (2011) refer to the last step of the ongoing assessment cycle (Suskie, 2012) as "closing the loop," referring to the practice of stakeholders applying the results of the data collected to inform improvements to programs or policies, a step they note often goes incomplete.

Figure 1. Cycle of Assessment (Suskie 2012)



Such an approach of *closing the loop* and using data for program improvement can be seen as a specific type of data use. As research on data use in the field of evaluation grew, multiple types of data use or dimensions of data use have been identified (e.g., Caracelli, 2000; Henry & Mark, 2003; Jonson, et al., 2015; Kirkhart, 2000; Leviton & Hughes, 1981; Patton, 2008; Weiss, 1977). Such differentiation in data use within a social science context can be seamlessly applied in a higher education assessment context, helping to inform how student affairs practitioners approach assessment data use in their work. Yousey-Elsener (2013) provided a more detailed visual for Suskie's (2012) cycle of assessment that also moves away from the concept of "using the results" to moves to a more broad approach of "informing decisions and practices".

Figure 2. Detailed Cycle of Assessment (Yousey-Elsener, 2013)



Yousey-Elsener's (2013) cycle and in particular the step of informing decisions and practices is more closely in line with a broader approach to data use within the assessment cycle, as will be discussed later in this chapter.

This first section laid the foundation of how nuanced language tied to specific evaluation and assessment terms play a role in how practitioners both understand the concepts and actually operationalize them in the context of their work. Next, it is critical to continue unpacking assessment in higher education by providing an overview of the history of the assessment movement and how the field has matured to what it is today.

History of the Assessment Movement

Student affairs is considered a relatively young profession within the broader history and context of higher education that dates back to the colonial era in the United States (Thelin, 2004). Assessment as an essential function of student affairs is even younger, just reaching its thirty-year milestone (Elkins, 2015). In order to understand the context of student affairs assessment today and the identified challenge of assessment data use, it is important to first understand the evolution of assessment and how it has been fully integrated into defined responsibilities on many campuses across the United States both in the area of higher education and student affairs (Cooper & Terrell, 2013). This evolution has influenced how assessment is currently framed and how the construct of use has been applied over time.

History of Assessment in Higher Education

While there is no documented start date for when assessment came to be considered a specialized function within higher education, Astin (1991) suggests that assessment had become an important part of higher education in the 1970s. However, Ewell (2008), who is often viewed as one of the foremost scholars and chroniclers of higher education assessment, argues that assessment as a movement in higher education began in 1985 (Kuh, 2009). This unofficial “birth” is associated with the convening of the first National Conference on Assessment in Higher Education (Bresciani, et al., 2009; Ewell, 2008). While assessment in education, particularly K-12, has earlier origins, for the purposes of this literature review, the historical analysis will begin with what Ewell defines as the beginning of higher education’s assessment movement.

Coinciding with the 1985 National Conference on Assessment, three reports were published which focused on higher education and the need for assessment: *Involvement in Learning* (National Institute of Education, 1984), *Integrity in the College Curriculum* (Association of American Colleges and Universities, 1985), and *Time for Results* (National Governors Association, 1986). Bresciani, et al. (2009) point out the tension in ideologies between two of these documents in that *Involvement in Learning* (National Institute of Education, 1984) represented a continuous improvement paradigm, whereas *Time for Results* (National Governors Association, 1986) fell into the accountability paradigm of assessment in higher education. More about the tension between these paradigms will be discussed in a later section.

Federal Government and Regional Accreditors' Involvement with Assessment. The 1992 reauthorization of the Higher Education Act (HEA) of 1965 included accountability provisions requiring accreditors to be more stringent in having student achievement data as part of the accreditation process (Ewell, 2008). Recently the federal government placed greater emphasis on assessment within higher education as exemplified by the 2006 Spellings Commission, which questioned what students were learning and whether students were fully prepared for the workforce upon graduation (U.S. Department of Education, 2006). The Spellings Commission report included the explicit recommendation that colleges and universities measure and report student learning outcomes (U.S. Department of Education, 2006). Since the federal government does not have direct oversight for higher education, that role of monitoring and ensuring educational quality is left to regional accrediting agencies.

Regional accrediting bodies have been in place in the United States for over a century (Ewell, 2008). While accreditors began to focus on institutional effectiveness in the 1980s, greater emphasis was placed on assessment in recent years with student learning outcomes assessment becoming an expectation. In 2013, six higher education associations and seven regional accrediting commissions endorsed a joint statement placing greater emphasis on effective outcomes assessment within three domains areas: evidence of student learning, evaluation of student academic performance, and post-graduation outcomes (Principles for Effective Assessment of Student Achievement, 2013). The associations and accrediting agencies emphasized that within the student learning domain, there is a need for institutions to not only define what students should learn both inside and outside of the classroom, but to also provide evidence of learning in both realms. In doing so, student affairs needs to be a central partner in the assessment process in order to contribute evidence related to out-of-classroom learning and to complement other outcomes-based evidence that colleges and universities are expected to provide. Two things are important about this joint statement. The first is that while not a single student affairs professional association was part of this group, the associations and accreditors, by referring to the co-curriculum, recognized the contribution of student affairs to student learning and assessment. Second, while this statement goes beyond defining outcomes and includes having both an assessment process in place and collecting evidence, the statement stops short of expressing the need for how the assessment evidence has influenced the institution.

History of Student Affairs Assessment

While, historically, traditional functions associated with student affairs date back to the first colleges and universities in the United States, when faculty fulfilled the duties now responsible by student affairs administrators (Thelin, 2004), the 1937 and 1949 Student Personnel Point of View (SPPV) documents essentially mark the beginning of student affairs as a profession with an identity (American Council on Education, 1937/1949). Assessment as a specialized functional area with dedicated staff is a much more recent phenomenon. While the history of student affairs assessment truly has taken place over the last thirty years (Elkins, 2015), it is important to acknowledge the semblances of assessment during the formative days of student affairs. The word *assessment* does not appear in either of the SPPV documents. Nonetheless, there is an acknowledgement to the broader field of evaluation in the context of institutional effectiveness (American Council on Education, 1937) and outcomes evaluation based on the intended goals of programs and services (American Council on Education, 1949). According to Schuh (2015), by today's standards, references made in those two documents speak to assessment for accountability more so than for continuous improvement.

In 1996, more than a decade after what Ewell (2008) coined saw as the start of the higher education assessment movement, Upcraft and Schuh (1996), who authored two of the main student affairs assessment primers, advocated for student affairs to adopt comprehensive assessment programs. Over the past almost 25 years, there have been a number of publications on assessment that are operative or prescriptive in nature and geared more toward student affairs administrators or those leading assessment in higher education in co-curricular environments. Additionally, practitioner-driven books (e.g., Banta, et al., 2009; Banta & Palomba, 2015; Bresciani, et al., 2010; Bresciani, et al., 2004; Henning & Roberts, 2016; Palomba & Banta, 1999; Schuh & Associates, 2009; Schuh, Biddix, Dean & Kinzie 2016; Suskie, 2012; Upcraft & Schuh, 1996) were published on assessment as the student affairs assessment movement began to mature in the 2000's. Such publications have helped to introduce practitioners to good assessment practice and many are written as "how to" books, from planning to execution and dissemination. In addition, student affairs professional associations have published documents articulating the need for assessment within the profession, as well as the need for a greater connection to student learning through co-curricular experiences.

In response, student affairs professional associations, including both ACPA-College Student Educators International and NASPA- Student Affairs Administrators in Higher Education, heeded the national call for student learning assessment by publishing three seminal student affairs student learning assessment documents: *The Student Learning Imperative* (American College Personnel Association (ACPA), 1994), *Learning Reconsidered* (Keeling, 2004), and *Learning Reconsidered 2* (Keeling, 2006). These publications helped place more emphasis on both assessment and student learning outcomes within the co-curriculum (Yousey-Elsener, et al., 2015). *The Student Learning Imperative* (American College Personnel Association (ACPA), 1994) articulated student affairs' shared responsibility with faculty and academic affairs to assess student learning and create intentional experiences for students to achieve broad outcomes. The primary message and call to action was that student affairs organizations must be learning-centered in its work and mission, and that practice should be grounded in research and assessment. The authors of this document argue that to best contribute to the outcomes of an undergraduate education, programs in student affairs must be assessed (American College Personnel Association (ACPA), 1994). In some ways, this document can be seen as a paradigm shift from a focus on student development to a broader commitment to student learning. With the publication of *Learning Reconsidered* (Keeling, 2004) and *Learning*

Reconsidered 2 (Keeling, 2006), there was a much greater emphasis on a more direct articulation of the types of student learning that student affairs are most responsible for on their respective campuses, as well as on assessment. Where *Learning Reconsidered* (Keeling, 2004) focused more on providing the context and framework for a holistic approach to student learning, *Learning Reconsidered 2* (Keeling, 2006) provided more tangible examples of how campuses approach student learning outcomes assessment and apply the concepts from the previous publication (Keeling, 2004). Keeling, et al. (2008) extended this focus on student learning assessment with a third book, *Assessment Reconsidered*, which framed assessment and data collection methods within the larger landscape of higher education from a political, financial, and policy standpoint.

In addition to these seminal student learning and assessment documents, ACPA and NASPA created professional development frameworks around student affairs assessment through publications such as *ASK Standards* (American College Personnel Association (ACPA), 2007) and *Assessment Education Framework* (National Association of Student Personnel Administrators (NASPA), 2009), which serve as foundational documents for professionals to understand what assessment skills and competencies are necessary for today's student affairs practitioners, regardless of what functional area one might work in (Yousey-Elsener, et al., 2015).

Assessment as a Functional Role. As the call for assessment began to be answered within student affairs, the question of who would lead such efforts helped cultivate an emerging and specialized role for assessment professionals. Student Affairs Assessment Leaders (SAAL), a group of student affairs professionals who coordinate and lead assessment efforts on their campuses, formed in 2008 as a structured but informal organization that meets at various student affairs national conferences to discuss issues and share best practices (Elkins, 2015). SAAL conducted surveys in 2009 and 2013 to better understand the landscape of student affairs assessment and the needs of its members. In 2009, there were 40 identified assessment professionals but by 2013, that number had increased to 233 (Elling & Bentrim, 2013). The dramatic increase of identified staff leading assessment efforts across the country is impressive given the two surveys were conducted just four years apart. Additionally, between 2015 and 2017 there has been an increase in books associated with student affairs assessment. For example, two publications focusing on coordinating and leading assessment efforts at the divisional level in student affairs (i.e., Phillips Bingham, et al., 2015; Yousey-Elsener, et al., 2015) and text books on student affairs assessment practice (i.e., Henning & Roberts, 2016; Schuh, et al., 2016) were released. In addition, a new peer reviewed journal emerged called *the Journal of Student Affairs Inquiry*, which was an effort from the SAAL group to have a dedicated space for student affairs assessment scholarship. As assessment has become a more integrated part of colleges and universities, with individuals dedicated to lead such efforts, student affairs has joined the ranks of academic affairs, an area which has had similar assessment focused positions at the college and institutional level.

Outcomes Assessment in Higher Education. A primary focus of recent literature in higher education assessment has been on outcomes, focused specifically on student learning (e.g., Bresciani, et al., 2009; Kuh, et al., 2015; Maki, 2004; Suskie, 2012; Walvord, 2010). Outcomes-based assessment is only one type of assessment and, when rooted in student learning, often is assigned to classroom-based (i.e., curricular) student learning. Student affairs typically has more robust assessment structures and approaches involving needs, process (tracking and satisfaction), and outcomes (student learning) (Henning & Roberts, 2016; Schuh, 2009).

Paradigms of Improvement and Accountability

In addition to framing assessment within a broad historical context, it is also important to situate assessment within the two main paradigms that have been the driving force behind assessment efforts on college campuses. Ewell (2002, 2008, 2009) describes these two paradigms of assessment, improvement and accountability, which often are at odds with one another. Keeling, et al. (2008) similarly agree that assessment in higher education responds to two primary drivers: external demands for accountability and internal commitment to improvement. Kuh (2009) provides a visual to the analogy of improvement and accountability purposes, describing it as two separate trains running on parallel tracks without the design to converge, allowing for richer answers to questions related to both purposes. Which track an institution might be on in regard to accountability or improvement can influence the assessment culture that is developed, and may ultimately affect the practice of use or lack thereof. For an enhanced practice of assessment data use to be more closely associated with a continuous improvement culture, rather than one of accountability, practitioners need to move beyond the perception that doing something with the data means just writing and submitting a report to one's supervisor, or that data use is just proof of assessment being conducted as part of an external accrediting agencies' guidelines (Peterson & Augustine, 2000; Peterson & Einarson, 2001). Ikenberry and Kuh (2015) echo this, noting that moving assessment from a "culture of compliance" (p. 22) to one of continuous improvement is a challenge. They go on to note that when assessment is framed as a form of compliance, the results often gain no traction, or else the results fail to wind up with anyone who might put them to use.

Ewell (2009) takes the dichotomy of assessment paradigms a step further by delineating the purpose, stance, ethos, and implementation process for both an improvement and accountability paradigm. The following table illustrates Ewell's (2009) dichotomy of the assessment paradigm.

Table 1. Paradigms of Assessment (Ewell, 2009)

	Assessment for Improvement	**Assessment for Accountability**
Strategic Dimensions		
Intent	Formative (Improvement)	Summative (Judgment)
Stance	Internal	External
Predominant Ethos	Engagement	Compliance
Application Choices		
Instrumentation	Multiple/Triangulation	Standardized
Nature of Evidence	Quantitative and Qualitative	Quantitative
Reference Points	Over Time, Comparative, Established Goal	Comparative or Fixed Standard
Communication of Results	Multiple Internal Channels and Media	Public Communication
Use of Results	Multiple Feedback Loops	Reporting

The purpose of assessment, as well as the stance that an institution adopts regarding assessment, informs how any assessment process becomes enacted on the campus (Ewell, 2009). Whereas the improvement paradigm has a more formative approach, with both quantitative and qualitative strategies being acceptable, the accountability paradigm uses a summative approach where quantitative methods are mostly used (Ewell, 2009). In turn, assessment results under the improvement paradigm might be used to inform and guide an intervention or change within the institution. However, through the accountability paradigm, assessment results are reported to external stakeholders to demonstrate effectiveness (Ewell, 2009). Such opposite-end uses, particularly through the accountability paradigm, foster a focus on positive results, whereas an improvement paradigm allows for departments and institutions to recognize areas that need work and could be fixed. Ewell (2008) argues that one of the strategic choices higher education should make in terms of assessment is that of transparency. This means that institutions must share not only the positive results that place them in a good light, but also subpar results with explanations of how they plan to improve. Such a view of transparency, while driven by accountability, might help institutions view assessment from an improvement standpoint. This, in turn, could help institutions identify tangible strategies regarding how results might be used to inform improvement.

It is important to consider the impact and role of the two paradigms of assessment because it has implications for not only how those involved in data collection view assessment and how processes are structured, but also how assessment results will ultimately be used. It is important to note that while accountability and improvement will inform conversations with staff members who are interviewed for this project, the primary purpose of the study is to explore the practice of assessment data use through the paradigm of internal continuous improvement. Both Ewell (2008, 2009) and Keeling, et al. (2008) suggest that accountability emanates from external stakeholders such as regional accrediting agencies and federal agencies, because these agencies hold the institution accountable. Student affairs might play a part in such reporting by providing pieces of information to meet institutional requirements, but student affairs is often not the central facilitator of coordinating accreditation processes for the University. As a result, student affairs' response to assessment is less externally driven as it may be for other areas of the institution.

When looking at student affairs literature on assessment, as well as cycles of assessment, the student affairs' position is more typically aligned with the paradigm of improvement and building a culture of evidence (Culp & Dungy, 2012; Schuh, 2015). Interestingly, in order to structure student affairs assessments, facilitators of assessment design processes, timelines, and annual reporting elements adopt, perhaps unintentionally, a more accountability paradigmatic approach. Even though student affairs professionals conduct assessment primarily to improve program and service effectiveness, including student learning, the assessment processes, timelines, and templates for reporting assessment results may wind up being about accountability. This study will examine these structures to see how they impact the practice of assessment data use. Ewell (2008) and Keeling et al. (2008) suggest the tension or drivers of assessment for higher education trickle down to student affairs and the unit-level assessment being conducted by staff members.

Standards of Use

As the primary focus of this study is to look at the practice of use of assessment results, it is critical to examine how the concept of use has been addressed by scholars, as well as professional associations, through standards and guidelines on assessment in higher education and student affairs. Understanding how *use* has been framed helps explain why there might be a gap in actual use or type of use on which practitioners have primarily focused.

Given that assessment falls under the larger umbrella of evaluation, the Joint Committee on Standards for Educational Evaluation (Yarbough, Shulha, Hopson, & Caruthers, 2011) outlined thirty standard statements for program evaluation based on the categories of utility, feasibility, propriety, accuracy, and accountability. Eight of the standard statements specifically focus on utility for individuals engaged in evaluation. Utility, as described earlier, is a concept associated on the front end of data collection and assessment or evaluation design that focuses on probable use (Patton, 2012). Suskie (2006) compiled a list of 19 sets of guidelines or principles for assessment proffered by various higher education associations and authors who have written about assessment. Of those sets of guidelines or principles, 12 speak directly to the issue of use or action taken upon assessment results. Given its inclusion in these principles and guidelines, the notion of use of assessment results is clearly seen as an essential part of the assessment process. Kinzie et al. (2015) offer seven principles specific to fostering greater use of assessment results. These principles include ideas such as measuring the value of assessment by whether the results are used, beginning assessment planning with the end use in mind, and leveraging accreditation to lead to action and improvement around student learning.

Student Affairs Assessment Standards

Within the higher education landscape, a panel of authors from the American Association for Higher Education (AAHE) developed the *9 Principles of Good Practice for Assessing Student Learning* (Astin, et al., 1996). Upcraft and Schuh (1996) adapted those nine principles, expanding them to not only reflect assessment of student learning, but student affairs assessment as a whole. Of the nine principles, four directly speak to the issues of use, improvement, or change as a result of assessment. Only the ninth principle addresses the issue of an external audience and meeting the responsibility for accountability of reporting information on student learning. In considering these guiding principles and where AAHE falls in terms of the assessment paradigms discussed earlier, it is clear that assessment is framed with improvement, rather than accountability, as the aim.

The Council for the Advancement of Standards in Higher Education (CAS), a higher education organization established in 1979, promotes standards of quality practice for functions typically housed within student affairs on college campuses (Yousey-Elsener, et al., 2015). CAS has established standards for 45 different functional areas including standards for what the organization refers to as "Assessment Services" (Council for the Advancement of Standards in Higher Education [CAS], 2012). Like Astin's (1991) AAHE's *Principles of Good Practice for Assessment Student Learning* and Schuh's (1996) adapted student affairs version, the standards and guidelines for "Assessment Services" within CAS (2012) also see the notions of dissemination, use for decision-making, and ultimately improvement as all being critical to an assessment function within student affairs. Those concepts are woven throughout the ten parts of the standards written for Assessment Services (CAS, 2012). While such standards are in place, the broader question as to whether or not student affairs staff approach assessment from an improvement and data influencing process warrants further exploration. Lastly, what also needs to be unpacked is the question of what is truly meant by the concept of use and how scholars have delineated different forms of use that may not be as clearly articulated within higher education assessment literature.

Student Affairs Literature and Assessment Data Use

While the study relies more so on evaluation literature as a means to frame the concept of data use, student affairs books that are focused on assessment often include a single chapter dedicated to assessment data use. This section provides insight about how assessment use has been framed in such student affairs assessment focused chapters and books (i.e. Doyle & Meents-Decaigny, 2015; Henning & Roberts, 2015; Schuh, et al., 2016; Yousey-Elsener, et al., 2015). Books such as Henning and Roberts (2016) and Schuh et al. (2016) are written more as primers on student affairs assessment that could be used within a higher education or student affairs graduate program or for practitioner-based curriculum for an assessment training or certificate series. Yousey-Elsener, et al., (2015), on the other hand, place divisional leadership or the coordinator charged with developing and leading student affairs assessment as the primary reader.

Henning and Roberts (2015), Schuh et al. (2016), and Yousey-Elsener, et al. (2015) recognize that while *use* is the ultimate goal with assessment, it is most challenging and is often where student affairs fall short. Each of the authors (Henning & Roberts, 2015, Schuh, et al., 2016; Yousey-Elsener, et al., 2015) frame student affairs assessment and the concept of *use* within the improvement paradigm as well as findings- or results-based use. Doyle and Meents-Decaigny (2015) and Henning and Roberts (2015) suggest that aligning assessment with divisional and institutional initiatives and priorities will help set an assessment up to lead to ultimate use. Whereas Doyle and Meents-Decaigny (2015) and Henning and Roberts (2015) focused on broad types of decisions that assessment can inform, Schuh et al. (2016) focused on how being more intentional and effective in the reporting phase can better lead to data use.

While such publications that are normative in nature may include chapters describing various types of assessment such as satisfaction, needs, outcomes, etc. (i.e. Henning & Roberts, 2016), *use* is discussed as if there is one primary form of data use typically centered around decision making or instrumental use (Caracelli, 2000; Kirkhart, 2000; Mark & Henry, 2004).

Henning and Roberts (2015) and Doyle and Meents-Decaigny (2015) both frame assessment use in terms of decision making, resource allocation, and planning, while Henning and Roberts (2015) also include improvement as one of the four purposes of assessment use. Henning and Roberts (2015) do acknowledge that assessment data alone is one piece of evidence, but many other pieces of evidence go into making a decision, thus supporting the idea of data-informed, rather than data-driven, decision-making. To better understand assessment data use within the context of student affairs, and heeding Banta's (2002) call for assessment leaders to look to evaluation literature to inform assessment scholarship, the next section focuses on taxonomies of use, born in the field of evaluation, in order to provide further context to frame this study.

Taxonomy of Use

Data use is more complex and multifaceted than universally applying results to directly improve a program that has been assessed. There are multiple forms and taxonomies of use that must be understood in order to fully explore what that practice looks like for student affairs professionals engaged in assessment work at various levels of the organization. Four primary kinds of data use have been identified by researchers: instrumental (Caracelli, 2000), conceptual (Weiss, 1977), symbolic (Leviton & Hughes, 1981), and process-based data use (Patton, 2008). The first three are findings-based, where use stems from the results of the assessment. Often, when discussing the use of data, instrumental data use is automatically assumed, even though this constitutes only one type of use. This misguided assumption minimizes the impact of assessment and is problematic in many ways. The following sections explain the taxonomy of use in more detail.

Instrumental Use

Instrumental use involves direct, immediate action or decision-making based on the findings of the evaluation, which can have implications for the program or policy being evaluated (Caracelli, 2000; Kirkhart, 2000; Mark & Henry, 2004). Instrumental use, and the direct application of results for purposes of improvement, have become the default when referring to use of assessment data. When considering the cycles or processes of assessment found in assessment textbooks, the final step is typically using assessment results to inform decisions that lead to improvement (Banta & Blaich, 2011; Suskie, 2012). Such description falls into the instrumental type of use with the change occurring through action that is stimulated by the findings of the evaluation (Mark & Henry, 2004). Weiss, Murphy-Graham, Birkeland (2005) argue pure instrumental use for decision-making is not commonplace though.

Conceptual Use

The second type of use is conceptual, sometimes referred to as enlightenment, where the use of assessment data leads not to direct or immediate action or influence on decision making through the results of the evaluation, but rather to a new or different understanding gained through the findings (Weiss, 1977). This type of use helps staff think about their work differently or brings to light a new and interesting way to think about what was being assessed. While findings-based, it has similarities to process use. Weiss, et al. (2005) described conceptual use as "when evaluation findings percolate into the decision arena in direct and indirect ways". They also note this conceptual use might take place over time.

Symbolic Use

The third type, symbolic use, entails using data to justify or advocate for a cause or a decision by providing supporting evidence for a pre-existing assumption about a program being assessed (Leviton & Hughes, 1981, Mark & Henry, 2004). Symbolic use can also be about legitimizing an existing point of view, a program already in place, or a decision that has already been made (Weiss, et al., 2005) or using the pure existence of an evaluation for persuasion, rather than looking to the findings (Johnson, Greensid, Toal, King, Lawrenz, Volkov, 2009). When student affairs practitioners base policies on little more than anecdotal stories or trends, formal assessments may be beneficial through symbolic use, since this type of assessment has the potential to corroborate anecdotal evidence, and also provides data to support previous informal understandings. The assessment findings can be used to persuade others as to the merit of a given program or service.

Process Use

Process use, the fourth type of data use, is unlike the first three types in that data use does not stem from the findings but, as the name suggests, the process of evaluation itself. The influence of the evaluation stems from the participation by those involved with the evaluation and what is learned by conducting the evaluation itself (Patton, 2008). To further add to the nuances of process use, there are also dimensions of process use (Greene, 1988), as well as organizational levels of process use (Cousins, 2003). The three dimensions of process-based use include cognitive, affective, and political dimensions Greene (1988). Cognitive process use refers to how the understanding of a given program being evaluated changes through discussion, reflection, and processing of information involved in the evaluation process. Affective process use is about how those involved in the evaluation feel about themselves in relation to the value or worth of the evaluation. Political process use involves giving recognition and voice to the less powerful (often the participants of the program being evaluated) as well as sparking dialogue and bringing to light societal issues through the evaluation process (Greene, 1988). In terms of the organizational levels, Cousins (2003) divide process use into individual, group, and organizational process use. Looking at use from a nested perspective might aid in understanding how assessment use is demonstrated at an individual, departmental, or divisional level.

Covering the various types of data use provides a greater understanding to the complexity of the topic of this dissertation and helps explain why this study examined the practice of student affairs assessment use through a wider lens than what has been historically done. While instrumental use might be the privileged default type of use when discussing evaluation or assessment cycles, the other types of use also demonstrate utility in the evaluation or assessment process.

In this section, information has been provided in terms of language and terminology, history of the assessment movement in higher education and student affairs, and standards and taxonomy associated with the concept of use. The remaining portion of this chapter will focus more on the concept of data use itself, and presents empirical and theoretical literature associated with use of assessment data. First, an overview of empirical literature related to data use will be provided, followed by an exploration of the conceptual and theoretical work on use to supplement where gaps in empirical work exist.

Empirical Literature on Assessment Data Use

While there are publications and books on conducting assessment which often include chapters or sections on use of assessment results (i.e., Phillips Bingham, et al., 2015; Bresciani, et al., 2009; Henning & Roberts, 2016, Doyle & Meents-Decaigny, 2015; Kinzie, et al., 2015), these publications are mostly normative in nature, advocating for the importance of data use, but they fail to explore how assessment results have been used. This section examines those studies that focus on data use in higher education and student affairs.

Peterson and Augustine (2000) and Peterson and Einarson (2001) published two research articles on assessment in higher education based upon a survey the researchers created This survey is known as the Institutional Support for Student Assessment (ISSA), and was sent to chief academic officers across the United States. In the articles, the authors acknowledge the lack of empirical data on assessment and its use, particularly in relation to the impact on educational decisions at various institutional types (Peterson & Augustine, 2000; Peterson & Einarson, 2001). This study notes the importance of institutional context and its direct influence on the approach to assessment, and the structure and support provided for assessment (Peterson & Augustine, 2000; Peterson & Einarson, 2001).

Through the ISSA study, researchers found that, overall, assessment had a marginal influence on educational decisions (Peterson & Augustine 2000; Peterson & Einarson, 2001). Peterson and Einarson (2001) argue that the low scores on influence are reflective of the lack of monitoring institutions have done related to the decision indices involved with this study. Of the educational decision indices from the survey, modifying student assessment plans or processes was the decision most influenced by assessment and most often reported (Peterson & Augustine, 2000). This is an important finding because it demonstrates the way in which data use or data influence can fall into the process use category. In terms of institutional types, their research showed that doctoral and research institutions reported the least influence of assessment data on educational decisions as compared to other institutional types (Peterson & Augustine, 2000; Peterson & Einarson, 2001).

Lastly, the authors found a higher level of significance among the predictors of influence of student assessment data when assessment was for improvement purposes, rather than accountability (Petersen & Augustine, 2000). Conducting assessment for accreditation purposes, however, emerged as a negative predictor (Peterson & Augustine, 2000). Finally, Peterson and Augustine (2000) found that when an institution involves student affairs staff in the assessment process, it is a significant, positive predictor of the influence of assessment data on decisions.

Use and National Surveys

Recognizing the dearth of literature on use of assessment results, particularly related to commercially-developed surveys that many campuses rely on as one of their primary means of assessment, three studies have been conducted on various national surveys and use of results: the Global Perspective Inventory (Engberg, Manderino, & Dollard, 2015), the National Survey of Student Engagement (Ahren, et al., 2008), and the Wabash Study (Blaich & Wise, 2010, 2011). Engberg et al. (2015) conducted a qualitative study focusing on institutions that had administered the Global Perspective Inventory (GPI). Their study examined how institutions decided upon using an externally developed instrument, how campuses use the results to improve their practices, and what barriers and challenges institutions face in translating survey results into actionable strategies for change. Additionally, the authors provided a set of recommendations for both campus practitioners and providers of commercial surveys.

Two outcomes emerged from the study's research questions on data use: first, the survey results served as a catalyst for conversation, and second, it provided evidence for previous anecdotal information (Engberg, et al., 2015). The researchers acknowledged that the findings related to direct use for improvement or change purposes were minimal, but found use had not manifested itself in terms of direct changes to programs and policies (Engberg, et al., 2015). This finding can be interpreted to say instrumental use was not as evident as cognitive process use (Patton, 2008) or symbolic use (Levitan & Hughes, 1981).

In the second study on use and national surveys, Blaich and Wise (2010, 2011) reflected on the Wabash National Study's participating institutions and the assumptions and lessons learned around structuring assessment for greater use. The Wabash National Study is a large, longitudinal study focused on critical factors that affect the outcomes of liberal arts institutions (Blaich, 2011). Blaich and Wise (2010) make the case that most arguments about assessment center on issues of measurement. This is consistent with articles included in the 2011 issue of Research in Higher Education, an issue entirely focused on multiple measurement critiques of the National Survey of Student Engagement (Campbell & Cabrera, 2011; Porter, 2011). McCormick and McClenney (2012), however, disagreed, suggesting that the purpose of the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) is more about institutional improvement, not tight psychometrics, and that the NSSE has consequential validity related to use. Blaich and Wise (2010) make the argument that by focusing so heavily on issues of validity and sound measurement, the assumption is being made that the largest challenge to use is a technical one, rather than a more practical one.

In terms of language, Blaich and Wise (2010) argue that when building campus support, the evidence from the Wabash Study was meant to "supplement and inform their work, not to tell them 'the truth' about their students" (p.70). Such emphasis is important and is often lacking in how assessment is described and interpreted. Campuses look for answers and silver-bullet approaches, often failing to consider assessment in terms of informing, supplementing, and influencing decisions. Rather, data use is understood as direct applicability and evidence leading directly to decision-making. Blaich and Wise (2011) offer three suggestions to help institutions engage with assessment data: (1) build campus support for the assessment project; (2) connect data generated from the assessment with assessment questions from faculty and staff; and (3) incorporate financial support in the form of an improvement fund to aid in data use post-data collection and interpretation. Overall, Blaich and Wise (2010) argue that for use to increase, "assessment must be reconceptualized to be about institutional improvement rather than a data gathering program" (p.72).

Like the studies done by Engberg et al. (2015) and Blaich and Wise (2010, 2011), both of which explored use in the context of a single survey instrument, Ahren, et al., (2008) focused on commercially developed survey data use, but within the specific context of student affairs, by examining data use from the results of National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE). Ahren, et al. (2008) interviewed student affairs staff who were responsible for administering NSSE on their respective campuses. While their parameters for selecting which campuses on which to focus their study was not articulated, the authors highlight how NSSE data has been successfully used. However, the article does not present any findings from staff who admitted limited data use or challenges with using NSSE data. This study identified five themes on successful data use from the NSSE results: (1) collaborating and communicating results; (2) using additional data for triangulation; (3) using data to learn about students; (4) using data to demonstrate goal achievement; and (5) enhancing the first-year experience (Ahren, et al., 2008). The theme of collaboration reinforces Coburn and Turner's (2012) notion of the practice of data use and the interactional process that is involved in making meaning of the data, as well as cognitive process use (Patton, 2008). Additionally, the theme of learning about students would be deemed as conceptual use (Weiss, 1977), whereas the theme of an enhanced first year experience represents instrumental use where improvement or change occurs as a result of the findings. As campuses often use national commercially developed surveys to conduct assessment, these three studies help provide insight into both the challenges and successes related to use from these instruments.

Research from National Institute for Learning Outcomes Assessment

The National Institute for Learning Outcomes Assessment (NILOA), an initiative between the University of Illinois at Urbana Champaign and Indiana University, has been a leader in conducting research on student learning outcomes assessment, as well as publishing papers surrounding assessment data use, including the challenges and best practices for using assessment data through case studies. NILOA published the results of two surveys on the issue of institutional use of student learning outcomes assessment results (see Kuh et al., 2014; Kuh & Ikenberry 2009), as well as qualitative case studies about use (see Baker, et al., 2012). The surveys focused on implications at a broader institutional level, rather than specifically student affairs.

In 2009, NILOA invited Provosts or Chief Academic Officers at each regionally accredited, undergraduate degree granting, two- and four-year public, private, and for-profit institutions to participate in a study examining assessment processes and use of assessment results institutionally (Kuh & Ikenberry, 2009). Of those invited, 53% of the Provosts/Chief Academic Officers, representing 1,518 institutions, participated in the study (Kuh & Ikenberry, 2009). Some of the main findings from this important study include that 75% of the institutions surveyed had adopted some set of learning outcomes for undergraduates and out of 22 possible options for uses of assessment data, institution and program level accreditation were the most commonly cited. Though assessment approaches and use of assessment vary by both institutional type and institutional selectivity the most selective institutions were least likely to use assessment for either accreditation or internal improvement, but more so for governing boards. The study also found that in terms of staff structure, 20% have no assessment staff in place and only 25% have more than one full time assessment staff member (Kuh & Ikenberry, 2009). So while student-learning outcomes were among the stated goals for assessment, the most common mention of survey data usage for the purposes of accreditation, and most institutions surveyed had little or no staff dedicated to conducting assessment specifically on their campus.

A follow-up study was published five years later mirroring the scope, methodology, and study participants of the original study (Kuh et al., 2014). This follow-up study again examined the current state of assessment in higher education about how assessment data is gathered and used. Forty-three percent (1,202) of the invited regionally accredited, undergraduate degree granting institutions in the United States participated in this study with 725 of the same institutions participating in the 2009 study, allowing the researches to observe some broad changes (Kuh et al., 2014). Eighty-three percent of the Provosts/Chief Academic Officers, who participated also responded to open-ended questions further describing their ideas around student learning outcomes assessment. Kuh et al. (2014) viewed such a high participation in the open-ended questions as a testament to the level of importance placed on student learning outcomes assessment for today's colleges and universities (Kuh et al., 2014).

It is worth noting in this study that there was a 10% increase in the number of institutions that have learning outcomes for all of their students, with 42% of the institutions having both institutional level and academic program level learning outcomes aligned (Kuh, et al., 2014). In terms of the drivers for assessment of student learning, accreditation (both regional and program) is the most important factor, actually showing an increase between 2009 and 2013. Institutional commitment to improvement was cited as the third most important driver for assessment, whereas faculty and staff interest in student learning outcomes assessment showed a marked improvement as a driver of data use (Kuh, et al., 2014). National surveys continue to be the most commonly cited form of assessment of student learning, but more direct measures, such as rubrics and embedded classroom assessments, have grown as tools of assessment. One of the most important findings from this study is that institutional use of assessment findings increased between 2009 and 2013 in every category in the survey (Kuh, et al, 2014). While this finding is promising, complying with regional and program accreditation is still the most widely cited use of student learning outcome assessment (Kuh, et al., 2014), suggesting that assessment continue to be used primarily for accountability. However, use for internal improvement purposes showed the greatest area of growth between the two surveys. The most frequently cited findings related to internal improvement activities included program review, strategic planning, curriculum modifications, and policy development. The authors also noted that use of assessment findings to guide changes was more often cited at the department/program level rather than at an institutional level.

Any conversation about use of assessment results will necessarily include a discussion about how assessment activity is communicated to various stakeholders. The study by Kuh et al. (2014) found that statements related learning outcome are most frequently shared, while statements related to the use of student learning assessment, impact of assessment use, and improvement plans are the least communicated. NILOA also published a qualitative study examining best practices related to using assessment results (Baker, et al., 2012). That study examined nine case studies at select two- and four-year institutions with robust assessment processes and a history of assessment data use that highlighted use of assessment data for improvement and decision-making (Baker, et al, 2012). The major themes that emerged across the case studies included grounding assessment to pertinent questions faculty had on the campus, intentionally shifting from accountability to continuous improvement, communicating results widely across the institution, and making time for faculty and staff to reflect and make meaning of the assessment data (Baker, et al., 2012).

Research on Student Affairs and Assessment Data Use

While there is a dearth of empirical literature on use of assessment data in higher education, the literature that does exist takes more of an institutional lens, meaning even less research has focused specifically on use of assessment data by student affairs departments. Yet, Henning and Roberts (2015, p.63) deem closing the loop and using assessment data is one of the most important step in the process stating, “If there is no plan to use the information for improvement, there is no reason to do an assessment." Two studies have been identified that each take a specific look at student affairs assessment pertaining to use. One of those studies, the NSSE study (Ahren, et al., 2008), was already discussed in the previous section on national surveys, but is noted here because of its specific focus on student affairs. The other qualitative case study (Green, et al., 2008) recognized the lack of research on student learning outcomes assessment in student affairs. The researchers focused their examination on broad student affairs learning outcomes assessment practices at institutions with more mature assessment structures, taking a more operational approach to how, and by whom, such assessment is conducted (Green, et al., 2008). Of the study's six research questions, one question specifically focused on the concept of assessment use for enhancing the student experience. Through this case study, the researchers interviewed chief student affairs officers, directors/coordinators of student affairs assessment, members of the assessment committee, as well as student affairs staff that included both directors and non-directors (Green, et al., 2008).

With regard to the results of the research question on use, the researchers found that of the three case studies conducted, 29 decisions were made based on the student learning outcome assessment conducted (Green, et al., 2008). Forty-five percent of the decisions made using assessment results were to modify a program or service, 28% of the decisions were to modify the method used to assess student learning, and 25% of the decisions were made to continue existing practices and validate student learning occurring (Green, et al., 2008). What is important to note from this study is that less than half of the decisions would be deemed as instrumental use in that the findings helped initiate a change in a program or services, whereas almost a third of the decisions would constitute process use, and a quarter of the decisions represented symbolic use.

While Green, et al. (2008) do not use this language or distinguish the types of use that they found, their study does reinforce the notion that an expanded conceptualization of data use is warranted and could prove beneficial. If instrumental use is as privileged over other types of use as Kirkhart (2000) suggests, this study could have concluded that with only 45% of the decisions made to improve or modify programs or services, assessment is not being used for the intended purpose of assessment. When applying an expanded conceptualization of data use to include process and symbolic use, 53% of the decisions would demonstrate student affairs learning outcomes assessment was indeed having an impact on the practitioners and programs/services discussed in the three case studies by Green, et al. (2008).

While there has been some empirical work on assessment data use in higher education, and to a lesser extent in student affairs, the literature is limited and only begins to scratch the surface. While these studies help to operationalize where and how use is or is not occurring, it is also important to examine conceptual and theoretical literature on use that can help shape ways to design future studies on assessment and reframe how practitioners describe what use is. The next section provides an examination of thoughtful and complex ways to explore assessment data use that can help shape the conceptual framework guiding this dissertation.

Conceptual and Theoretical Work on Use

While scholars have written extensively on the topic of data use stemming from evaluation and assessment, much of the literature can be placed in a conceptual paradigm. The goal has been to unpack this elusive topic, which has been narrowly defined and has not always taken into account the multiple approaches and types of use that occur during and after an evaluation or assessment is conducted. This section explores the theoretical frameworks and models that have been developed to account for both types of use, as well as other factors that add to the complexity of this topic.

Theories and Models of Use

A number of theories and models about data use have been developed as a means to assist in describing the complexity and multiple factors affecting data use in an evaluation context (see Jonson, et al., 2000; Henry & Mark, 2003; Mark & Henry, 2004). Data-driven decision making (Spillane, 2012), and data use in general, have been narrowly conceptualized through an instrumental definition leading to the question of whether or not evaluation and assessment results are being utilized (Jonson, et al., 2015; Kirkhart, 2000).

Kirkhart (2000) argues that a more inclusive understanding of the impact of evaluation has been inhibited by the language and scope around which data use has been framed. Scholars such as Jonson, et al., (2015), Kirkhart (2000), and Mark and Henry (2004) have put forth variations on different theoretical models in order to understand data use outside of the bounds of viewing it only from the lens of instrumental use or results-based use. The various models offer different ways to look at data use, as well as different ways to consider the motivations and factors, which have an impact on the degree of data use. The following sections explain each of the theories and models in more detail, incorporating the multiple forms and dimensions of data use.

Kirkhart's Theory of Influence. Kirkhart (2000) argues for a reconceptualization of the construct of evaluation use. She asserts that the word *use* is awkward on its own and represents a narrow definition of data use, which privileges results-based use over other types of use, such as process-based use. Kirkhart (2002), like others (e.g., Hopson, 2000; Patton, 2000; Weiss, 1981), focuses on the power of language as it relates to evaluation. While Weiss (1981) advocated a shift toward the word *use* instead of *utilization*, Kirkhart (2000) suggests a broader shift to the term *evaluation influence* instead. From Kirkhart's (2000) perspective, the word *influence* is a more inclusive term than either *utilization* or *use*.

> The term *influence* (the capacity or power of persons or things to produce effects on others by intangible or indirect means) is broader than use, creating a framework with which to examine effects that are multidirectional, incremental, unintentional, and noninstrumental, alongside those that are unidirectional, episodic, intended, and instrumental (which are well represented by the term *use*). (Kirkhart, 2000)

Kirkhart (2000) takes this conversation around language a step further by introducing a framework that maps evaluation influence along three dimensions: source, intention, and time. Her framework illustrates how influence allows multiple ways to understand the phenomenon of evaluation use. The subsequent paragraphs in this section will focus on each of these three dimensions of use and how they relate to her overall framework.

Source of Influence. The first dimension in Kirkhart's (2000) theory is the source of influence for how evaluation data is used. Source of influence refers to the point of reference, which sparks a change or where the influence begins. To unpack this abstract description, there are two parallel sources of influence in Kirkhart's (2000) model. The first source of influence emanates from the formative or summative evaluation results directly, whereas the second source of influence results from the evaluation process itself (2000). Framing the source of influence in terms of types of data use, results-based influence includes instrumental use, conceptual use, and symbolic use (also referred to as political use), whereas process influence includes a cognitive, affective, and political dimension (Greene, 1988). In many ways, when the concept of data use is discussed, the source of influence is often the sole dimension considered. Providing a focus on the source of influence recognizes that results are not the only way that evaluation or assessment impacts decision-making, and it opens up new ways for people to think about the value of assessment.

Intention. The second dimension in Kirkhart's (2000) theory is intention, which describes the extent to which the data influence was purposeful and anticipated or unintended and unforeseen at the outset of the assessment project by the evaluator and key stakeholders. Both have value and, as Kirkhart (2000) points out, some evaluations will only have intended influence, some only unintended influences, and others will have both. Like the first dimension, intention has often been defined narrowly, thus not allowing for the impact of unanticipated influences.

Time. The third dimension, time, represents the continuum from which data influence might occur from the evaluation or assessment being conducted. This dimension allows for influence at three different points: immediate, end-of-cycle, and long term. Immediate influence begins to occur during the steps involved with constructing and administering an evaluation. Much like Patton's (2008) conceptualization, where the process of use is the result of participating in an evaluation and the impact that has on those involved, immediate influence recognizes that use begins while an evaluation is taking place. End-of-cycle influence represents the influence that occurs at the conclusion of a project that emanates from writing the final evaluation report or summary and disseminating the findings to stakeholders. The impact of an evaluation might not be seen or emerge until much later than the close of a project. Competing priorities and other programmatic responsibilities do not always allow evaluation influence to occur within a small window of time immediately following an evaluation project. Long-term influence allows evaluation data to be used multiple times. Since an evaluation question might already exist, practitioners should look for existing data that was collected through a previous project and use that information to influence a programmatic or policy decision at a much later date.

Kirkhart (2000) notes that what is important about this dimension is the question of whether use is viewed as a "point in time" event or as a process. Other scholars (e.g., Leviton & Hughes, 1981, Weiss, 1981) have also critiqued use being seen as an event, and Cronbach (1982) positioned use as a process rather than as a singular event or point in time. When considering the cycle of assessment, and particularly the "closing the loop" step (Banta & Blaich, 2010), the visual implies an episodic, time-oriented immediacy where the results are used to inform decisions before moving on to reassessing the improvement. Suskie's (2012) well-accepted cycle of assessment (see Figure 1: Cycle of Assessment) suggests that assessment data use happens soon after results have been communicated and interpreted, not allowing for data use to occur either simultaneously as the assessment is underway, or germinate, allowing data use to evolve over an extended period of time.

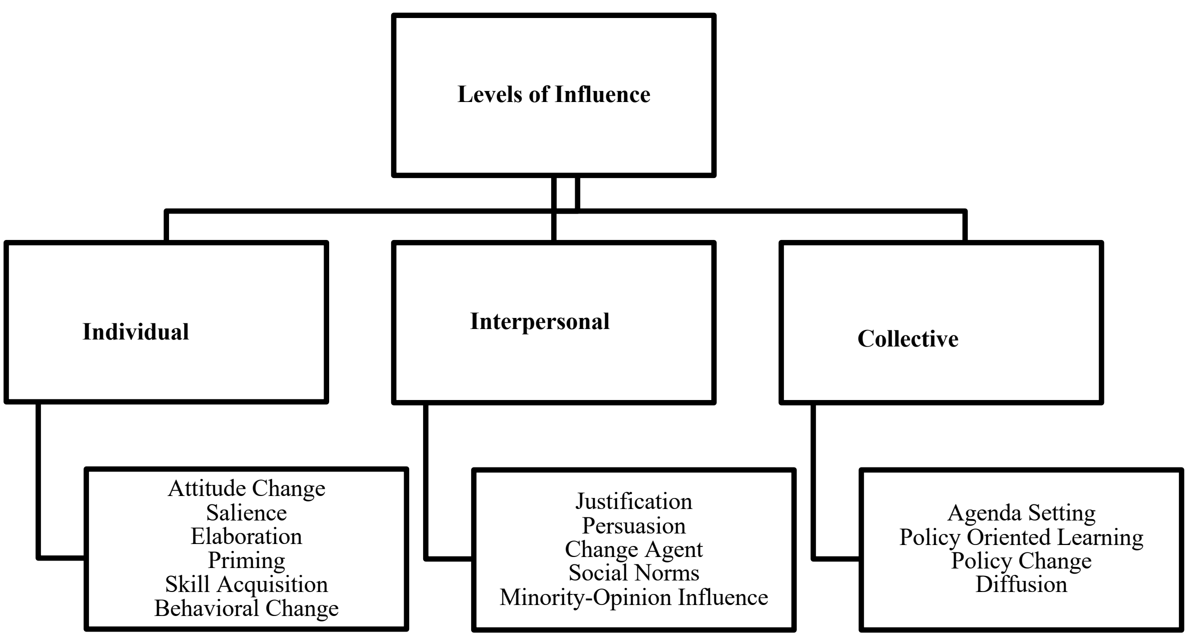
Kirkhart (2000) offers a number of applications for this integrated theory of influence representing the impact of multiple dimensions and paradigms of how and when influence of evaluation data occurs. For example, this theory is multifaceted, the dimensions are not mutually exclusive, and it takes a non-linear approach to data use. This theory also offers an expanded conceptualization of data use, a construct correction to prior ways to look at use, as well as new language to represent what previously had been coined as utilization and use. Kirkhart's (2000) theory provides a framework from which to map the influence of evaluation or assessment projects to better understand at what point in time and in which ways conducting an evaluation has an impact on programs and policies, as well as on the staff involved in the project. Kirkhart (2000) contends that this theory will improve the validity of studies around data use by providing new ways to empirically examine data use.

Mark and Henry's Framework of Mechanisms. A second framework with a broad conceptualization for data use through the lens of "influence" is Mark and Henry's (2004) framework for evaluation influence. Like Kirkhart (2000), Mark and Henry (2004) recognize that the construct of data use has been limited by its primary association with instrumental use or results-driven use that leads to more immediate and direct action from the findings. This framework builds off a previous piece by Henry and Mark (2003) which specifically outlined fifteen mechanisms or constructs through which both findings and evaluation processes influence the attitudes and behaviors at the individual, interpersonal, or collective levels.

Mark and Henry (2004) contend that a central part of evaluative change, as well as conceptualizations of use, is missing in the literature because the literature tends to focus solely on predictors and types of use. Their framework focuses on the mechanisms of influence through three levels of analysis (individual, interpersonal, and collective) and four types of processes (general influence, attitudinal, motivational, and behavioral) (see Figure 3). In doing so, Mark and Henry (2004) believe that the gap in the literature is addressed.

It is important to note that the 'process' mechanisms are not the same as Patton's (2008) process use, as Mark and Henry (2004) speak more broadly to the process of influence, rather than to what is gained through the specific process of conducting an evaluation. Through their earlier framework, Henry and Mark (2003) identify three levels of influence, which recognize the multiple pathways that change from evaluation may occur. The first level, individual, corresponds to a change in the thoughts and actions of an individual person as a result of the process or findings from an evaluation, and it includes the mechanisms of attitude change, salience, elaboration, priming, skill acquisition, and behavioral change (Henry & Mark, 2003). The second level, interpersonal, refers to change that occurs as a result of interactions between individuals through mechanisms such as justification, persuasion, change agent, social norms, and minority-opinion influence (Henry & Mark, 2003). The third level, collective, relates to how an evaluation influences an organization in terms of decision-making and the change that occurs at the organizational level via agenda setting, policy oriented learning, policy change, and diffusion mechanisms (Henry & Mark, 2003).

Figure 3. Mechanisms through which evaluation produces influences



In describing the levels of analysis, Henry and Mark (2003) point out that while the influence might start at one level, such as an individual level, this can trigger change at another level, perhaps the interpersonal or collective level. What Henry and Mark (2003) do not say explicitly is whether evaluation influence occurs linearly through these three levels of analysis or whether the mechanisms of change must occur first at the individual level before influencing the collective level. These three levels of analysis can prove useful in looking at how data use or influence occurs beyond just the organizational level. If an evaluation or assessment cannot be directly connected to improvement or change at the organizational level through a program or policy, this does not mean that the data have not influenced an individual or group of individuals. Absent but related to Henry and Mark's (2003) level of analysis is how time, as Kirkhart (2000) points out, is a factor in evaluation influence. Henry and Mark (2003) built upon this initial framework by adding another component, which focuses on what the change, looks like, be it attitude, motivation, or behavior.

Mark and Henry's (2004) framework includes four kinds of mechanisms: general influence processes, cognitive and affective/attitudinal processes, motivational processes, and behavioral processes (see Figure 2). General influence process serves as the base for the framework and sets in motion a change in one or more of the other three categories. Cognitive and affective processes represent changes that occur in thoughts and feelings as a result of an evaluation, whereas motivational processes pertain to goals and aspirations or rewards and punishments that come with an evaluation, particularly those involved with the program being evaluated. The last part of the framework are the behavioral processes, which refers to changes in actions through programmatic or policy changes that are enacted as a result of an evaluation. This framework presents evaluation influence on a continuum, but not necessarily a linear one. Mark and Henry (2004) note that an evaluation might set in motion more than one process, as one process (i.e. individual) can stimulate another process (i.e. interpersonal). What begins from a place of influence on an individual might move into an interpersonal form of influence and an eventual collective influence as a result of the evaluation.

This framework aids in recognizing that the collective influence an evaluation has on an organization in terms of its programs or policies might not occur directly, as is often described, but rather an evaluation and its influence might take time to traverse the three levels of analysis, beginning with the individual. This framework also helps to operationalize types of use, namely instrumental, conceptual, and symbolic use, by providing an overlay to understanding which mechanisms move certain types of use through an influence-based framework. Instrumental use fits with the behavioral processes, whereas conceptual use corresponds with cognitive and affective processes within this framework. Symbolic use does have a place within this framework, but it fits more with specific elements of the individual, interpersonal, and collective levels (Henry & Mark, 2003; Mark & Henry, 2004).

Mark and Henry (2004) identify a few benefits to this model that are directly applicable to this dissertation. The first is that this framework of evaluation influence can add to the extant empirical literature by serving as a guide for research on the topic of data use. Second, this framework provides some clarity to types of use and how they can be operationalized. Lastly, this framework has the potential to provide those engaged in evaluation new ways to look at how dissemination and work with stakeholders can include plans to help address the various mechanisms that stimulate evaluation influence at various levels (Mark & Henry, 2004).

Jonson, Gueeterman and Thompson's Integrated Model of Assessment Influence. While the previous two theories and frameworks on evaluation influence can be overlaid onto multiple educational and non-educational sectors, the third model of data influence (Jonson, et al., 2015) is grounded within an assessment and higher education context. This model was created partially in response to Banta's (2002) call for assessment leaders to look to the field of evaluation as a base for assessment scholarship. The model was also created in response to the underlying assumption that use is defined by immediate, direct, and observable change as a result of assessment findings and the subsequent underrepresentation of use in assessment literature (Jonson, et al., 2015). Like Kirkhart (2000), Jonson, et al. (2015) advocate for shifting the focus from use of assessment or evaluation to its influence. Both of their frameworks are multidimensional, and elements of the frameworks are not mutually exclusive.

Jonson, et al. (2015) expand and adapt Kirkhart's (2000) integrated theory of influence beyond the source, intention, and time elements of that framework by adding two additional assessment influences: effects and results of influence. Effects of influence act as a mediator between the process of or findings from an assessment and the programs and policies associated with the assessment. The effects of influence are related to widely accepted types of use and include the following in this dimension: instrumental, conceptual/cognitive (conceptual use), affect (process use), and affirmation (symbolic use). Effects of influence is actually the second dimension of influence and follows from the source of influence dimension. Results of influence is the third dimension of Jonson, et al.'s (2015) framework and represents the actual outcome of an assessment that may include improved student learning, personal transformation (empowerment, change in beliefs, motivation), new or enhanced communities of practice, or symbolic/political results that support previous positions about a program or policy. Each of these new dimensions operationalize assessment influence and provide examples of what assessment influence might look like beyond the standard instrumental use of data. Kirkhart's model (2000) focused on evaluation influence in a bounded "time, place, and manner" framework, whereas Jonson, et al. (2015) address the content of assessment influence through their framework by describing how influence occurs and what impact it has on the program or policy evaluation.

What makes this framework unique is that the authors not only introduce an expanded framework, but they applied it in a qualitative content analysis study using their framework and associated dimensions as an *a priori* coding scheme to examine assessment reports. Through their analysis, the researchers found that 75% of the cases were findings-based and 25% were process-based. Of the finding-based cases, only 28% of the cases were found to constitute instrumental influence (Jonson, et al., 2015). Yet, findings-based, instrumental use has been the standard from which assessment use has been measured for decades. Thus, without applying a broader framework of assessment influence, the other 75% of the cases that that did not have direct, immediate, and observable changes could have been interpreted as non-use.

When examining the *effects of the influence*, which is the framework's second dimension, 60% of the cases were coded as conceptual/cognitive and affirmative influences, and only 11% of the cases could be coded for the *results of influence* dimension (Jonson, et al., 2015). The researchers believe this finding has a relationship to the time dimension and the results of influence might not have been realized yet in relation to the time of the assessment and this study (Jonson, et al., 2015). One critique offered by the researchers suggested that interviews with the faculty who led the assessment would have been more beneficial examining the results of influence dimension.

Overall, Jonson et al.'s (2015) framework provides another lens from which to explore an expanded view of assessment influence by looking at source, effect, results, and time of influence in order to more fully understand what *closing the loop* looks like in higher education. Instead of stopping at the finding that only 11% of the cases noted direct change as a result of the assessment, applying their framework allows one to see the impact of assessment influence though other means that have not been given as much attention in the literature. Additionally, the researchers recommend future research using this framework, particularly in other contexts, which a study focused on student affairs would provide to the field. What is also interesting to note about Jonson, et al.'s (2015) contribution of this expanded model is that it comes fifteen years after Kirkhart (2000) first advocated for a shift from *use* to *influence* and operationalized the word by providing a framework. It begs the question of why it took that long and why such a reconceptualization and adoption of a framework on evaluation or assessment influence failed to gained traction prior to 2015.

This section provided a review of the primary conceptual and theoretical work on use as it relates to this dissertation specifically examining the taxonomies of use, as well as three theories and models of use, that serve as the conceptual framework for this dissertation. While much has been written on why assessment is important, how to conduct assessment, and evaluation theories that can aid in the scholarship of assessment, it is clear that empirical literature on assessment data use in higher education, and more specifically in student affairs, is lacking.

Conceptual Framework

Miles and Huberman (1994) describe a conceptual framework as the researcher's map of what is being studied by describing some of the constructs and variables as well as their interrelated nature with the context of investigation. Not only will the conceptual framework help to guide the study, but also aid in the coding process in the proposed analysis. In many ways, the conceptual framework for this proposed study has been laid out primarily in the last half of this literature review. This section will serve as a summary for the conceptual framework based on the concepts and theoretical models to highlight the core concepts and elements, which will frame this study and how it is approached methodologically.

The conceptual framework for this study on the practice of assessment data use within student affairs is primarily derived from Coburn and Turner's (2012) focus on the actual practice of data use in a situated context, as well as Jonson, et al.'s (2015) integrated model concerning the influence of assessment data in higher education, Kirkhart's (2000) theory of influence of evaluation, and Henry & Mark's (2003) framework of evaluation influence mechanisms. The practice of data use (Coburn & Turner, 2012) is an important way to frame this study as it focuses the concept of use as an interactive experience between individuals and the assessment data. Coburn and Turner (2012) emphasize that when researching the practice of data use, there is a connection between the role of the organizational and group context and how that data use occurs in that environment. They also suggest that data use should be studied in its situated context. Thus, utilizing a case study methodology allows for the exploration of the practice of data use from a multi-level perspective of the practitioners involved in an organizational context.

The dissertation relies heavily on the scholars of evaluation who have challenged the traditional notions of data use through a narrow construct of direct instrumental use (i.e., Henry & Mark, 2003; Jonson, et al., 2015, & Kirkhart, 2000; Mark & Henry, 2004). Adopting

Table 2. Dissertation study conceptual framework

Kirkhart (2000)	Henry & Mark (2003)	Jonson, et al. (2015)
Source: • Findings • Process	**Mechanisms of Influence:** • Individual • Interpersonal • Collective	**Effects of Influence:** • Instrumental • Conceptual/Cognitive • Affect • Affirmation
Intention: • Intended • Unintended	**Influence Processes:** • Cognitive • Affective/Attitudinal • Motivational • Behavioral	**Results of Influence:** • Improved Student Learning • Personal Transformation • New or Enhanced Communities of Practice • Symbolic/Political Results
Time: • Immediate • End of Cycle • Long Term		

Kirkhart’s (2000) suggestion of data influence assists in expanding how this topic can be explored and discussed with the participants of this study. Table 2 lays out the conceptual framework for the current study.

Banta’s (2002) recommends that evaluation literature can ground scholarship in assessment and provides a different lens from which to examine the practice of data use. The frameworks used in this dissertation conceptually ground this study expand how assessment data use can be explored.

Summary

This chapter provides an overview of the evolution of the assessment movement in higher education and professional specialization in student affairs, along with its relationship to the construct of data use. This review emphasized that both assessment and use have been written about from an operational and normative perspective with limited empirical research on both topics, particularly from a higher education perspective and more specifically within a student affairs context. A primary challenge is that the construct of use has been narrowly defined and underrepresents the impact of assessment. This review concluded with some alternative perspectives on data use and influence that have applicability and value to this study by providing a broad framework from which the methodology and interpretation of collected data can be grounded. The next chapter will focus specifically on the methodology of the current study.

CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

The challenges of studying the practice of data use have been well documented as higher education has placed greater emphasis on assessment, both in and out of the classroom, over the past thirty years (Elkins, 2015; Ewell, 2008). The preceding literature review examined both the limited empirical research (Ahren, et al., 2008; Blaich & Wise, 2010, 2011; Engberg, et al., 2015; Green, et al., 2008; Kuh & Ikenberry, 2009; Kuh, et al., 2014) as well as conceptual literature focused on expanded frameworks of assessment use (Henry & Mark, 2003; Jonson, et al., 2015; Kirkhart, 2000; Mark & Henry, 2004). The literature review also helped to frame *use* as a core construct both within evaluation literature (Henry & Mark, 2003) and as an identified construct within the assessment process or cycle in higher education (Suskie, 2012; Yousey-Elsener et, al. 2015). Assessment data use, though, has been narrowly defined and limited to instrumental use, creating an underrepresentation of the practice of data use (Kirkhart, 2000; Jonson, et. al, 2015). Subsequently, the value or impact of assessment may have been minimized for both the individuals involved and the organizations, such as student affairs, in which the assessment is taking place.

A number of authors' recommendations lend themselves toward conducting a qualitative case study to further examine the practice of data use. Coburn and Turner (2012) have the most robust set of recommendations and suggestions for positioning research on data use. As noted in Chapter 2, Coburn and Turner (2012) identify three features of research on data use that directly relate to the research approach for this study: (1) data use is an interactive experience; (2) organizational environment and group context plays a role in how data use occurs; and (3) data use should be studied in a situated context. Coburn and Turner's (2012) last feature pertaining to the situated organizational context was also supported by Peterson and Augustine (2000) and Peterson and Einarson (2001) in their recommendations for future research on assessment in higher education. Jonson et al. (2015) take that notion of a situated context a step further by suggesting that in order to best explore the influence of assessment results, future researchers should specifically interview those individuals who directly conduct the assessment. Additionally, Coburn and Turner (2012) recommend that future research on data use be explored at multiple levels of the organization. Each of these recommendations, in conjunction with the research questions, support the qualitative methodology for this study.

Research Questions

This dissertation focused on staff members' perception of how assessment data are used within a student affairs organization at a four-year, non-profit, private university. The overarching question guiding this study was, "How do student affairs professionals engage in the practice of assessment data use and to what extent do they perceive it as use?" The study had five sub questions which were explored:

1. What informs student affairs staff members' understanding of the construct of *use* and what it means to put it into application?
2. How do existing organizational structures and processes affect how student affairs staff involved in assessment efforts move from data collection to data use?

a. Which organizational features (structure, processes, people/relationships, training/resources, rewards) facilitate the practice of assessment data use?

b. What barriers exist, if any, that impede assessment data use?

3. What types of data use are more prevalent than others in student affairs assessment?
4. How does the practice of data use differ depending on one's role in the organization?
5. How does time serve as a factor in the practice of assessment data use and how might that impact typical annual reporting assessment cycles?

The focus of the first research question is on staff members' understanding of the term *use* and how staff understand that construct and have applied it operationally in departmental assessment projects. It is important to explore the issue of language and how the term and definition adopted might either limit or enhance *use*. Similarly, it is important to examine the ways in which staff come to understand the concept of assessment data use. The second research question aims to look at assessment as a process within an organizational culture in which certain structures and processes might help and/or impede the use of assessment data. This question was important for both the chief student affairs officer and staff members charged with leading divisional assessment in order to understand how elements of the organization can impact assessment data use.

Research questions two, four, and five align with Coburn and Turner's (2012) view that research on data use can help to explain the "how" of the practice of data use, while question two also addresses Coburn and Turner's view that research can examine organizational features that facilitate or imped data use while looking at use at micro and macro levels within the organization. The third research question explores the multiple types of use that exist within a division of student affairs focused on learning outcomes assessment. It is important to better understand if there are other apparent types of use, outside of instrumental or direct results based on use. The fourth research question examines assessment data use from the perspectives of staff at different levels of the organization.

Lastly, the fifth research question explores whether or not time is a factor with assessment use in order to better understand what student affairs staff could realistically be expected to do with assessment results over time. Assessment processes are often developed over an academic or fiscal year and result in meeting a deadline for submission and moving on to next year's assessment process before making meaning and putting to use the results of the prior year's assessment.

Research Design

At its core, qualitative research focuses on meaning and understanding, specifically the ways in which experiences are interpreted and how individuals construct meaning (Merriam, 2009). Additional characteristics of qualitative research include research taking place in its natural setting, the researcher serving as the key instrument for data collection, using multiple sources of data, utilizing an emergent research design, and reflexivity on the part of the researchers as they collect and interpret their findings (Creswell, 2013). Findings from qualitative research are also presented through a rich, thick description (Creswell, 2013, Merriam, 2009). Using a qualitative methodology to examine assessment data use was a natural choice for this study since the step of the assessment process being studied falls somewhere between interpretation and the application of the findings. As such, interpretation and the social construction of the concept of data use lend itself well to qualitative research. According to

Baxter and Jack (2008), constructionism involves the belief in the relativity of truth and is dependent on each individual's perspective. Blaich and Wise (2010) argued, "'closing the loop' and moving from evidence to action is more of a political and interpersonal process than it is data driven" (p. 75). As such, the qualitative approach to this dissertation helped explore the interpersonal nature of assessment, including meaning making and forms of use.

Case Study Methodology

Assessment is a phenomenon on college campuses that is multi-faceted and complex, and it has implications for how an organization strives toward continuous improvement. Peterson and Einarson (2001) made the following recommendation regarding future research on assessment:

> A qualitative research approach would illuminate institutional processes involved in promoting and supporting student assessment. Conducting case studies of institutions with comprehensive student assessment processes that have produced institutional impacts may help identify institutional best practices in student assessment. (p.659)

According to Yin (2014), "a case study is an in-depth empirical inquiry of a contemporary phenomenon in a real-world context where the boundaries of the case are not always clear." Case study research methodology is appropriate for this dissertation since the focal points of the study included attention to a particular organization, process, and the applied concept of assessment data use. Case study design helps to better understand complex social phenomenon and is appropriate for studying organizations and the dynamics within them (Stake, 1995, Yin, 2014). Additionally, the research questions meet Yin's (2014) criteria of "how" and "why" questions being appropriately answered by case study research methodology, and the questions are situated within an institutional context. Finally, when conducting a case study, the researcher has little control over the events or with the proposed phenomenon to be studied (Yin, 2014).

The phenomenon that is examined in this study is the practice of assessment data use in higher education with the unit of analysis (or case) being one university with an established process and culture of assessment within its division of student affairs. Specifically focusing on a division, rather than on an entire institution, further bound the case study. This notion of a bounded system is a key construct in case study research because it provides a more focused scope by focusing a particular aspect within that phenomenon (Merriam, 2009; Stake, 1995; Yin, 2014). The case in this instance was further bound by focusing specifically on student learning outcomes assessment, rather than on other types of assessment (i.e. satisfaction, benchmarking needs). Finally, the case was bound in that the study examined assessment that had taken place over a three-year period (2015-2017).

There are different types and functions of case study research depending on the phenomenon being examined that determine the best way to address the research questions (Merriam, 2009). The research design for this study uses a single, descriptive, instrumental case study. The main purpose of the study is to describe the practice of assessment data use in student affairs using the specific context of a university's division, and the staff members involved with assessment, in order to shed light on assessment data use.

Study Propositions

Yin (2014) explains that case study research design may include propositions the researcher put forth at the outset of the study directing attention to elements that should be examined further within the case. A few initial propositions for this study included: (1)

assessment data use, like change, must be framed on a continuum, and while assessment data use in student affairs is happening at many institutions, the type of data use might be at a different place on the spectrum rather than simply framed through instrumental use; (2) a broader definition of data use, when applied to assessment, will show greater evidence of the impact of assessment from an influence perspective; and (3) organizations that position assessment from an improvement paradigm, rather than one of accountability, will display greater levels of use when it comes to their assessment data.

Proposition one is supported by the conceptual framework and the work of Kirkhart (2000) and Jonson, et al. (2015) who advocate for a broader conceptualization of data use that include multiple types of data use, while also looking at how use might differ based on the factor of time. Proposition two is supported in the literature review and by empirical evidence that shows limited data use when only applying the traditionally accepted instrumental form of assessment data use that leads to direct program or policy change (Green, et al., 2008; Banta and Blaich, 2011; Engberg, et al., 2015; Peterson & Augustine 2000; Peterson & Einarson, 2001). Lastly, proposition three recognizes the tension between accountability and continuous improvement (Ewell, 2008; Keeling, et al., 2008; Kuh, 2009; Kuh & Ikenberry, 2009; Kuh, et al., 2014) and how assessment cultures grounded in an accountability paradigm focus more on the external drivers of assessment and expectations, as well as the requirements of reporting, rather than from an improvement paradigm that seeks to improve programs, services, and student experiences.

Site Selection and Context of Case

Selection of the case in this study was based on the following criteria: (1) An organization with a dedicated staff member charged with managing student affairs assessment at a divisional level; (2) an established divisional assessment process and structure in place for at least five years that included department-driven student learning outcomes assessment projects; (3) national recognition or involvement showcasing the division's best practices in assessment. Specifically, criterion one recognized the emergent role of staff charged with leading divisional assessment efforts who also served as a key informant and site coordinator for the case. Having a person in place also signaled that there was an established model and mechanism for assessment in the organization. Criteria two and three support Peterson and Einarson's (2001) recommendation that future research focus on an institution with an established culture of assessment, and Baker, et al.'s (2012) case study approach of selecting sites with robust assessment processes. The selected site far exceeded the criteria of having an assessment process in place for at least five years as this organization's assessment process was in its fifteenth year at the time of the study. Lastly, the site selected needed to have a division that focused on student learning outcomes assessment because of the emphasis student learning has had within the assessment movement.

Data Collection Approach

Four principles for data collection in case study research that will be addressed in this section include using multiple sources of evidence, ensuring participant confidentiality, creating a database to organize the data collected, and maintaining a chain of evidence (Yin, 2014). While Yin (2014) describes six types of case study evidence from which data can be collected, for the purposes of this study data, collection and triangulation of multiple forms of evidence included document analysis and interviews.

Document Analysis

The first method employed was document analysis, although this did not become the primary data source for this study. Document analysis refers to "the various procedures involved in analyzing and interpreting data generated from the examination of documents and records relevant to a particular study" (Schwandt, 2007, p.75). The documents that were examined include departmental assessment reports, divisional assessment planning templates and protocols for data collection, and assessment project posters from the division's annual assessment symposium. A document analysis protocol (see Appendix A) was used that incorporated questions that helped frame how the researcher read and reviewed each document (Yin, 2014). The approach taken with this form of analysis was to essentially interview the documents, which meant the questions in the protocol mirrored what might have been asked if actual interviews with people were conducted.

Information that emerged from the document analysis helped inform the second wave of data collection that included semi-structured interviews. The decision to conduct a document analysis first was intentional as it served to identify how *use* had been articulated through reporting mechanisms. The data analysis phase also served to inform the interview component of the data collection in two ways. First, it helped identify possible departments and staff members to include in the study. Second, it helped inform the actual interview questions, serving as a point of reference for the interviewees.

Interviews

The second and primary form of data collection involved interviewing a purposive sample of staff members to examine student affairs assessment data use from their individual perspectives at varying levels of the organization. In case study research, interviews have been seen as the most important source of data (Yin, 2014). Utilizing a semi-structured interview approach (see Appendix B and C), some questions in the protocol were tailored based on the departments' assessment project(s) and findings from the document analysis. A semi-structured approach allowed for flexibility in the interview where the conversation could be directed in a more natural way by the person being interviewed.

Interviews were conducted at four levels of the organizations: staff directly involved in facilitating an assessment project on behalf of their department; the directors of the respective department whose assessment projects have been included in the study; divisional assessment staff; and senior divisional leadership, including the Associate Vice President for Student Affairs. Two separate interview protocols were used, one for departmental staff (Appendix B) and one for divisional staff (Appendix C). The divisional staff are identified further in the sampling section of this chapter. Interviews began with the Assistant Vice President for Assessment, Planning, and Administration, who acted as both the site contact and the leader of the student affairs assessment initiative. Staff were asked prior to the day of their scheduled interview to review both their department assessment project report(s), and the poster(s) presented at the annual assessment symposium. Copies of the report were also made available at the interview for participants' reference. This allowed the researcher to bring some focus to the interview, refresh their memory, and provide greater context to some of the study participants comments and observations. The interviews were scheduled for 60 minutes and were audio recorded. All interviews will took place in the participants' office on campus in the student center where the Student Affairs departments are located. All interviews were completed within a one-month period.

Purposive Sampling Criteria and Study Participants. Purposive sampling was employed to identify potential departmental participants, which provided information-rich cases that inform the study (Patton, 2002). Data collection included interviews with the divisional staff including the Assistant Vice President for Student Affairs Planning & Assessment, Student Affairs Assessment Coordinator, and one associate vice president, all of whom were key informants to the case because of their divisional view regarding how assessment is used overall for the organization. There was a distinct need to determine which specific department-based directors and staff members involved in student learning outcomes departmental assessment projects were invited to participate in the study. Prior to embarking on the interviews I met with the assistant vice president as the key informant to discuss the study, approach, how the case was being bound and to see if there were departments she could think of that met the criteria and might make ideal participants for this study based on their involvement in recent assessment projects. While snowball sampling was not the main type of purposive sampling (Merriam, 2009) applied in this study, it served as a starting point. The first interview subsequently was also with the Assistant Vice President and allowed for an intermediate divisional perspective on how assessment data use has been framed. Having two primary sets of interview groups (divisional and departmental) provided insight into the practice of data use at different levels of the organization.

While the particular key stakeholders mentioned above had been pre-identified, certain criteria were necessary in order to determine which departments and staff members would be invited to participate in the study. With twelve departments in the Division of Student Affairs, the intent was to focus the study on three departments from within each of the associate vice president's department areas. The following criteria were employed to help identify staff participation and further bound the scope of the study:

1. The department has been recognized for a Best Practice Award with one or more of their assessment projects though the division's annual Assessment Symposium between 2015-2017.
2. The department Director has been in place for at least three years during the time period.
3. The primary staff member(s) facilitating the assessment project is still employed by the division.
4. There is representation of department participants from at least two of the associate vice president areas.

Merriam (2009) points out that the size of a sample is related to the number of factors related to the purpose of the study and that sample selection in case study happen at two levels: at the overall case level and within the case. As has been described, the current sample fits Merriam's rationale in that pre-determined senior leadership interviews represent the case level, and the department staff, including directors and staff who facilitated their departmental assessment project can be seen as the within-case sample.

Consent/Confidentiality

Beyond gaining study participant involvement, establishing greater trust in order to foster an openness for staff to share their thoughts and perspectives on their experiences with assessment and the notion of data use was critical. Given the varying levels of intended participants' roles within the organization, from the department level to senior student affairs leadership, participants who engaged in such conversations honestly could have been concerned about the political risks, as they may have been concerned how what they shared in the interview might be conveyed in the final draft of this dissertation. This concern was addressed in several ways. The first was through the use of a participant consent form (see Appendix D) in which participants were asked to affirm their understanding of the risks, benefits, and level of confidentiality in this study. No personal names or specific department names are shared in the findings in order to provide anonymity to the participants as best as possible. The second way to ensure anonymity was to protect the site of the case study by using a pseudonym for the university and masking identifying characteristics and institutional citations.

Data Management

Given the two primary types of data collection and the volume of data, thoughtful data management was critical. As part of the data management process, a third-party individual transcribed all audio recordings from the interviews and the researcher reviewed verbatim transcripts. Transcripts were shared with the interview participants to insure accuracy.

The researcher addressed Yin's (2014) final two principles of data collection in case study research through data management in the study. First, a case study database was created with NVivo, a computer-based qualitative analytics tool that assists with coding and categorizing large amounts of data. This tool was used to organize and maintain all documents including protocols, field notes, interview transcripts, and memos. Additionally, as part of this centralized data management approach, all coding derived from the field notes and transcripts was housed within NVivo on the researcher's password-protected computer. Having a central database and analytic tool allowed the research to go from multiple sources of data in various forms, documents and interview transcripts to a centralized data source. As noted by Yin (2014) taking these steps helps address the overall reliability of the study.

Second, outlining and referencing the sequential steps of this study helps provide a transparent audit trail that can serve as a chain of evidence to understand how the conclusions of the study connect back to the original research question, also strengthening the study's reliability. Linking the initial document analysis to the second phase of data collection through interviews and citing particular sources as they relate to findings was an important element. To ensure validity, member checking occurred with the interviewees. A copy of the interview transcript was emailed to respective interview participants for their review in order to ensure their perspectives were appropriately captured in the transcript. The themes and overall findings were also shared with each of the participants seeking any feedback, for example, if something stood out to them, they disagreed, or had questions. Additionally, a meeting was held with the site's key informant to walk through the themes that emerged in order to have a discussion around each of the overall findings of the study to help mitigate any misinterpretation.

Data Analysis

A distinguishing characteristic of qualitative research is that the researcher acts as the primary instrument for data collection and analysis (Merriam, 2009). As such, it is natural that data analysis begins to occur during the data collection process, allowing interpretation to start through both taking notes of themes and insights throughout the interview process, and through writing memos during the analysis process (Yin, 2014). Conducting the document analysis and analyzing the document field notes helped inform the interview component of the data collection process while maintaining an emergent design. Immediately after each interview I wrote myself a memo about key take aways and things to consider going into the next interview. Merriam (2009) describes the overall data analysis approach in qualitative research as inductive and comparative and Yin (2014) recognizes for the novice researcher conducting case study research, data analysis can be overwhelming.

In order to make sense of a large amount of data in narrative form, the data must be reduced and consolidated into mutually exclusive codes and categories to manageably manipulate the data to find patterns and derive meaning that address the research questions (Merriam, 2009). The analysis was begun by reviewing the document field notes and listening to each audio-recorded interview, prior to the interviews transcripts being completed. Once in written transcript form, I first read each transcript in its entirety, coded the document, and then wrote notes about insights from the analysis at that point in time. I employed two of Yin's (2014) general strategies for data analysis: working with the data from the "ground up" and reliance on theoretical propositions. While Yin (2014) suggests that these two particular strategies contrast one another, taking an inductive and emergent approach to the data analysis through open coding allowed an initial way to review the data to identify concepts and ideas that may not have fallen into one of the constructs within the theoretical frameworks informing much of this study. A second review was done using *a priori* theoretical constructs. While these may appear in opposition to one another, this process provided a balance to honoring a purist qualitative research design while also applying the expanded conceptualizations of assessment data use identified in the literature review to best understand and explain the case.

The researcher began by reading through two interview transcripts as part of the initial coding procedures. The constant comparative method was employed to identify initial similar codes within each document using both *a priori* codes and emerging codes. While the researcher already had definitions for the conceptual framework-based *a priori* codes, emerging codes were also assigned definitions and a central codebook was developed.

Table 3. Dissertation Study Conceptual Framework A Priori Codes

Kirkhart (2000)	**Henry & Mark (2003)**	**Jonson, et al. (2015)**	
Source:	**Mechanisms of Influence:**	**Effects of Influence:**	**Taxonomies of Use:**
Findings	Individual	Instrumental	Instrumental
Process	Interpersonal	Conceptual/Cognitive	Conceptual
	Collective	Affect	Process
		Affirmation	Symbolic
Intention:		**Results of Influence:**	
Intended		Improved Student Learning	
Unintended		Personal Transformation	
		New or Enhanced Communities of Practice	
		Symbolic/Political Results	
Time:			
Immediate			
End of Cycle			
Long Term			

The conceptual framework introduced at the end of chapter 2 served as the initial *a priori* coding scheme to help sort through the data, assign codes, and subsequently create categories. During the coding process, the conceptual framework was slightly modified as some elements of the framework, particularly some of Henry and Mark (2003) Influence Processes, were not as evident in the data, and were thus subsequently removed. Overarching taxonomies of use were added to the framework as a clearer addition to the coding process and making sense of the data.

These *a priori* codes, along with other emerging codes, were assigned using NVivo to allow for comparison and to eventually convert these codes into categories. Once open codes were created for all of the data collected, the researcher then created axial codes that looked for relationships and patterns across the data. Yin (2014) describes pattern matching as one of five possible analytic techniques used in case study research. While identifying relationships across the data, pattern matching included comparing the conceptual framework, with the variables identified through the document analysis and interview coding. Ultimately the patterns were connected back to the research questions to help explain the case.

Trustworthiness and Positionality

To strengthen the trustworthiness and authenticity of the study, it is important for the researcher in qualitative studies to disclose their positionality and potential biases as they relate to the study (Merriam, 2009; Stake, 1995). The intent of this section is to temporarily pause and introduce my voice as the researcher and my relationship to the study.

My interest in this dissertation topic stems from my work in higher education and student affairs for the past nineteen years, twelve of which have been spent in the area of student affairs assessment both at the departmental and divisional level. During that time, much of my focus has been placed on the process of assessment and helping staff members figure out how to "do" assessment, while spending virtually no time discussing how to apply the data that were collected to provide greater understanding, inform practice, and influence programmatic and policy decisions. In establishing a culture of assessment, an ongoing challenge is to help staff see the value in assessment beyond fulfilling a divisional mandate and building capacity for staff to feel comfortable and confident in conducting effective assessment. One way that the value of assessment can be enhanced is through articulated use of assessment, allowing for various forms and levels of *use,* which might help staff make greater connections to the full value of assessment. This study will help illuminate examples of various forms of *use*, including how to best foster assessment data use in a tangible manner. It is for this reason this dissertation centered on being a descriptive study of what *use* looks like in an individual division of student affairs.

This was the second study I conducted on the topic of data use. As a research team, I was previously part, we published a study examining the topic of data use through a multi-campus study on use of the Global Perspective Inventory results (Engberg, et. al, 2015). Exploring an expanded conceptualization of assessment data use, we focused on the topic of how results were used from an instrumental use framework. We found that the results were not being used due in part to time constraints of the staff. This study, while in a different context, enabled me to dig deeper to explore assessment data use from a broader paradigm of assessment data use.

Lastly, as the researcher, it is important to also disclose my familiarity with the case site. I previously worked with some of the staff, as well as presented and consulted with the Division on assessment and student learning outcome development. This presented both unique opportunities and challenges as a researcher. Due to my familiarity with the institution, division, and some staff members, I had a level of access and had an easier time gaining both involvement and trust with the participants. It was important during interviews to have the study participants fully answer questions and not assume my understanding of their assessment process and culture. The second challenge was to balance my own assumptions both as I review the assessment reports during document analysis, as well as during the interpretation that began during my interviews. Given my familiarity with the case, it was important for me to review those with fresh eyes.

Limitations

With any study, there are inherent limitations. One limitation of this dissertation and research design is utilizing a single case study approach focused on one particular campus and division of student affairs. While a focused and in-depth understanding of one organization can provide important insights into the topic of *use* based on the culture and context of that division of student affairs, the lack of comparable cases means that there is no way of knowing if what is found through the study is applicable to other student affairs divisions on other campuses. Another limitation of the study is the primary focus on *use*, rather than a more holistic look at the assessment process overall, including other steps within the assessment cycle, which might have an impact on *use*. Despite these limitations, the study's significance in adding to in the void in what has been studied in student affairs outweighed inherent challenges to the single-case study design.

Summary

After reviewing the literature and constructing a conceptual framework, this chapter outlined the methods that were employed for this study. Based on recommendations from scholars on future research on data use (e.g., Coburn & Turner, 2010; Peterson & Einarson, 2001) and conceptual theories (e.g., Henry & Mark, 2003; Jonson, et.al, 2015; Kirkhart, 2000; Mark & Henry, 2004) a qualitative methodology was utilized. While the overall research question centered on how student affairs staff members engage in the practice of assessment data use, this study further explored the construct of data use and its various types, organizational elements that facilitate or inhibit data use and how one's level within the organization impacts how assessment data is used, as well as the influence of time on assessment data use. To best address these questions, a single, descriptive case study design was employed. While the research questions evolved as the study developed, two modes of data collection were utilized: (1) document analysis of past assessment projects and protocols; and (2) interviews with divisional and department leaders, as well as staff facilitating assessment projects. Maintaining a database through NVivo aided in the analysis of this case, which included an inductive and *a priori* theoretical approach to coding the data. Overall, the goal with this study was to help extend previous research and apply conceptual literature to better understand the practice of assessment data use within the situated context of student affairs.

CHAPTER 4

FINDINGS

Utilizing a case study design, I explored the practice of assessment data use in a student affairs context with staff members who were involved with student learning outcomes assessment at various levels of the organization at a single institution. The overarching research question for my study was, “How do student affairs professionals engage in the practice of assessment data use and to what extent do they perceive it as use?” The study had five sub-questions which were explored:

1. What informs student affairs staff members’ understanding of the construct of *use* and what it means to put it into application?
2. How do existing organizational structures and processes affect how student affairs staff involved in assessment efforts move from data collection to data use?
   a. Which organizational features (structure, processes, people/relationships, training/resources, rewards) facilitate the practice of assessment data use?
   b. What barriers exist, if any, that impede assessment data use?
3. What types of data use are more prevalent than others in student affairs assessment?
4. How does the practice of data use differ depending on one’s role in the organization?
5. How does time serve as a factor in the practice of assessment data use and how might that impact typical annual reporting assessment cycles?

This chapter is organized into four sections. The first section focuses on the case description in order to provide a context for the University that was chosen for this study, as well as the division of student affairs and their assessment structure. Next, I provide brief profiles of the participants to introduce the staff I interviewed and describe who they are in relation to the case. The heart of this chapter focuses on the findings of the study, which are presented using a thematic format. This chapter concludes with a summary of the overall results of the study.

Case Description

University

The site of data collection for this case study is a large, private, religiously affiliated, doctoral granting university located in the midwest United States. All Saints University (ASU) has a mix of a residential and commuter students with over half of the first-year class living on campus in a residence hall. The campus enrollment is approximately 15,000 students, the majority of which are undergraduates. The institution is part of the Higher Learning Commission (HLC) accrediting region and, within the last three years, the university completed its reaffirmation of accreditation process, which occurs every ten years.

Division of Student Affairs

The Division of Student Affairs (which I will refer to as the Division) at ASU, which is the focus of this case study, is comprised of twelve departments. The Vice President for Student Affairs, whose cabinet includes three Associate Vice Presidents, an Assistant Vice President, and the twelve department directors, make up the leadership for the Division. The individual departments comprised within Student Affairs include following offices: Commuter Programs, Community Service Office, Counseling Center, Multicultural Center, Dean of Students, Health and Wellness, New Student Programs, Residential Life, Student Life, Disability Services, Student Success, and University Ministry. In total, the Division of Student Affairs employs approximately 100 staff members.

Student Affairs Assessment Initiative

The assessment initiative within ASU's Division of Student Affairs was established in 2005 and, over the course of thirteen years, the staff member who created the assessment model continues to oversee student affairs assessment for the division, although in modified capacity. This staff member's role with assessment has grown from being a part-time assessment coordinator to now serving as an Assistant Vice President overseeing assessment and other internal administrative functions within the organization. Consistent with the national trend in assessment, the evolution of her role indicates the increasing level of importance of assessment to Student Affairs. The Division also added a part-time Assessment Coordinator role in 2010 to help lead the learning outcomes assessment initiative, but has also relied heavily on additional support from the divisional Assessment Committee whose members serve as consultants and reviewers of each department-led assessment project. The assessment committee is comprised of ten to twelve staff members throughout the Division who have volunteered to be involved with this committee and the overall assessment process. The overall assessment model is tied to their annual reporting process at the departmental level. Based on identified core functions of each department, staff members are expected to collect evidence focused on three areas: tracking, satisfaction, and student learning.

In addition to data collection associated with each of these core functions, each department conducts an annual assessment in order to ask a question most pressing to the department as it relates to students. The annual assessment reports range in length between five and fifteen pages. More detail about these annual projects is provided in a subsequent section.

Student Affairs Learning Outcomes

ASU adopted a set of institutional learning goals in 2012 from which academic program learning outcomes have been developed and mapped in the various colleges within the university. In 2010 though the Student Affairs Division adopted five student learning domains and developed a comprehensive set of student learning outcome statements at the divisional, departmental, programmatic, and activity level which map to each learning domain. At that time, the Division shifted the annual assessment projects to be solely focused on student learning rather than on other forms of assessment such as satisfaction or benchmarking. Each project focused on assessing learning outcomes at either the activity or program level for each department. Projects are proposed in the early fall and are due the following July to coincide with the close of the fiscal year. July is also when the full department's annual reports are submitted to the assessment staff. These student learning-based assessment projects serve as the focus of this study to explore how staff have approached the practice of data use, in particular with student learning outcomes assessment.

In 2011, to help better disseminate assessment findings from the projects, engage in greater discussion, and celebrate successes, the Division created an Assessment Symposium. This symposium consists of a poster session where each of the department's assessment projects can be showcased. Beginning in 2014, awards were added to recognize the achievements of various departments, and these awards were based on elements of projects that were noteworthy and serve as a best practice. The Assessment Symposium has grown over the past seven years and now includes staff and faculty attendees from both student affairs and academic affairs, as well as individuals from area institution who have an interest in co-curricular learning outcomes assessment.

It should be noted that there is a strong assessment culture at ASU. This is evidenced by the strong collaborative relationships between divisional leadership, and in particular the assessment staff members and the Institutional Research Office, which reports to the Division of Enrollment Management, as well as with the Curricular Learning Assessment (CLA) Office, which reports to Academic Affairs. In particular, the CLA staff have worked to integrate the student affairs learning outcomes assessment projects into their institutional mapping process and institutional learning assessment database. The rubric specifically utilized by the assessment committee to evaluate and provide feedback on the final assessment project reports mirrors the rubric that the CLA staff use to evaluate the curricular learning outcomes assessment reports that faculty members lead each year. While this study focuses on Student Affairs learning outcomes assessment, it should be noted that in the past year and a half, other co-curricular departments that are not in the Student Affairs portfolio but report through Academic Affairs, have reached out to the Student Affairs assessment staff to help them develop similar learning outcomes for their departments.

Annual Assessment Project Process Description

In order to provide greater context to both the documents reviewed and the shared experiences that came out of the interviews, it is important that I review the student learning outcomes assessment project process and timeline that each unit goes through annually. The Division operates on a fiscal year that runs from July 1 through June 30. The Student Affairs annual reporting process coincides with the fiscal year and reports are due each July. Departments are responsible for providing goal updates and metrics tied to each key program or service that measures impact based on participation, reach, and satisfaction of participants. For the past fifteen years, each unit has been responsible for conducting an assessment project, the results of which are incorporated into the annual report. In the past seven years, those projects focused on measuring one or more of the departments' student learning outcomes. The annual student learning assessment projects occur over a thirteen-month period beginning in September and continuing until October of the following year.

Each September, the process begins with the director of each respective department identifying one or more staff members who will serve as the assessment project facilitator and lead the assessment on behalf of the department for that year. Although project ideas may come from summer staff retreats, in many cases the selected facilitator will suggest ideas. In October, each unit submits an assessment project plan that is reviewed by the divisional assessment committee members who are assigned in pairs to review each project and provide feedback both on the project plan and the resultant assessment report. In compliment with the central assessment staff, the assessment committee members provide additional support and guidance on the projects. To support each project facilitator within each department, the Division's assessment staff provide a high level of support and structure ranging from timelines, templates, workshops, on-going feedback, and one-on-one support. After the facilitators have been identified and projects plans are in place, the assessment staff host monthly facilitator meetings that combine both education and training, conduct check-ins, and help map out project timelines. Much of the fall is spent on project planning, specifically on refining assessment question and methodology, while the spring is spent collecting data and working on data analysis. This time sequence poses some limitations on what programs and services might be assessed based on when they typically occur during the academic year. This will be discussed later in this chapter.

All projects are due at the same time regardless of when a given program or service is being assessed or when the data collection is completed for a given assessment project. After submitting the respective student learning assessment project to the assessment staff, the same assessment committee members who provided feedback on their assessment project plan in the fall also provide comments and suggestions using a rubric to evaluate the quality of the assigned assessment project. Based on the report feedback, assessment facilitators are then given an opportunity to make revisions before ultimately submitting a final report in August.

In that same month, the assessment project facilitators are also asked to submit content for their respective posters that will be showcased in October at the Assessment Symposium. The assessment facilitators present their project in this informal poster session environment. All posters have a standard format based on a template which outlines the sections that should be included about their assessment project, including data use. The symposium serves as both a celebratory event for the division where select projects are awarded best practice ribbons, and as a means to disseminate results of the projects, allowing staff to have conversations around assessment. While the Assessment Symposium serves as the culmination of the previous year’s assessment project, by the time the event occurs, departments have already begun working on the next assessment project.

ASU’s Division of Student Affairs has a robust and well-supported assessment initiative in place that provides in-depth guidance, timelines, and feedback for the department’s annual assessment projects. This first section offered a case description in order to provide context about the institution, the division, and the assessment initiative at ASU. In the next section, I introduce the participants of this case study.

Study Participants

The sample for this study included both divisional and departmental staff members. Three participants served as their department's assessment facilitator for their respective assessment project over the course of either the 2015-2016 or 2016-2017 academic year. Three other participants were department directors who supervised each of the assessment facilitators. I also interviewed two divisional staff members who oversaw the assessment initiative and provided support and guidance to the projects, including oversight of the Assessment Committee. Lastly, I interviewed one senior level divisional leader who served as an Associate Vice President.

The participants in this study are highly educated, with all but one holding an advanced degree. Seven of the nine participants either have obtained a PhD or are currently working on their PhD in their respective fields. Of the five participants with a PhD, two have degrees specifically in higher education, while the other three participants have terminal degrees in either education or psychology. The other two participants are currently working on their PhD, one in higher education and the other in social work. While eight participants hold master's degrees as well, only two of them are from traditional student affairs masters' programs, which often serve as minimum requirement for roles in student affairs. The participants' average years of experience at ASU working in Student Affairs was twelve years, ranging from two years on the lower end to thirty-three years on the seasoned end of the spectrum. The following section provides additional background information on each of the participants that were interviewed.

Participant Profiles

Assessment Facilitator 1: Carmen. Carmen has been in her role at the institution for almost five years and has been working in higher education for over twelve years. She has served as the department assessment project facilitator for three years, has completed an assessment certificate program offered by the institution, and serves on the divisional assessment committee. The student learning outcomes assessment project she facilitated occurred over a two-year period as a pilot in year one and then an enhanced project in year two. The focus of the student learning assessment project was based on a semester-long first-year curricular experience that is a partnership with student affairs and academic affairs.

Director 1: Joe. Joe has served as director of his department for close to ten years and has been working in higher education for fifteen years in various capacities. He has a master's degree, and will soon have a PhD, all in higher education. Joe supervises Carmen.

Assessment Facilitator 2: Dana. Dana has worked at the institution for less than three years. She has a terminal degree in her field, though not in education. She has worked on other campuses in similar capacities through her graduate program. This was her first time facilitating an assessment project for the department. The student learning outcome assessment project she led was focused on a student outreach program series to better understand what students were learning as a result of their participation.

Director 2: Sam. Sam has served as a director for almost fifteen years at this institution and is a long-serving member of the divisional assessment committee. Sam has a terminal degree in his field, though not in education. Sam previously served as a facilitator for his unit's past assessment projects. Sam supervises Dana.

Assessment Facilitator 3: Elena. Elena has been at the institution for less than three years and this is her first professional position in higher education. She does not have a traditional student affairs background. This was her first time facilitating the department's assessment project. The focus of her assessment project was on community service leaders and their understanding and implementation of the concept of intentional community into their daily lives.

Director 3: Emily. Emily has been at the institution for almost twenty years in various capacities within the same department at ASU. She is currently working on her PhD in a field outside of education. Emily supervises Elena.

Assessment Staff Member 1: Olivia. Olivia has been in higher education for close to twenty-five years, twenty of which have been at the institution in this study. This senior staff member was also responsible for creating and overseeing the divisional assessment initiative for almost fifteen years. Olivia has a master's and PhD in higher education.

Assessment Staff Member 2: Leo. Leo has a PhD in education and brings a social services lens to his work in student affairs and with assessment. Leo has been at the institution for close to ten years both within a department and as a past assessment project facilitator, but for the past few years has served in a divisional assessment capacity. He is the third person to serve in this role and has taken the level of support to the departments and assessment facilitators to a greater level.

Senior Divisional Leader: Rosemary. Rosemary serves as an Associate Vice President for the Division where she supervises multiple departments, one of which is part of this case study. Her entire higher education career, spanning over thirty years, has been at this institution. For a period of time, she served as a co-chair to the divisional assessment committee. Rosemary has a PhD in higher education.

Overall, the participants brought a wealth of different perspectives about assessment and data use at varying levels of the organization and varying degrees of connectedness to the assessment projects. This served as the focal point of our conversations. The participants candidly shared their thoughts on the role of assessment in higher education. This, in turn, gave me insight into their own experiences with the student affairs student learning assessment initiative at ASU that I would not have had unless I had conducted this study. The participants' perspectives and experiences, coupled with what they provided in their assessment plans and reports, helped provide multiple lenses through which to view the case.

Working Definitions from Participants' Perspective

Before presenting the themes that emerged through this study, it is important to begin by sharing the participants' thoughts about what assessment data use means to them. Exploring participants' conceptual understanding of both assessment and data use is an important first step in examining how the participants operationalize these terms, since these terms influence their own experiences with assessment data use.

Assessment

Early in the interview, I asked each participant what he or she believes to be the purpose of assessment in higher education and student affairs. Responses included: to understand what students are learning; determine if students are achieving learning outcomes; to understand student affairs' impact on the student experience; ascertain if goals are being met; and determine whether programs and services are effective or how programs can be improved. Leo shared, "The purpose of assessment in student affairs is to provide information to help departments make better, smarter, more effective, educational interventions." Rosemary and Olivia both described assessment as being two-fold: to understand what students are learning and if they are achieving stated outcomes; and if they are not meeting stated outcomes, why not and how can the program be improved?

Assessment was not solely framed from a place of understanding, impact, and improvement, though. Like others, Joe noted that assessment is about continuous improvement. However, he also framed assessment as important to justify the work of student affairs, both in confirming that their approach is sound and in providing evidence to justify programmatic changes, which may be questioned without data to support the decision. His perspective is influenced by his department, which is charged with working with new students along with many campus stakeholders who are involved with the large program they manage. Joe shared,

> So much of our work relies on others trusting our knowledge and trusting our ability to articulate the experience that students are having, and assessment allows us to do that with more of a foundation rather than trying to share individual stories that are made out to represent the whole, which is very difficult to do when you're talking from anecdote.

Carmen, who also works in Joe's department, had some views similar to Joe about the purpose of assessment. She argues that assessment is not necessarily about justification, but about demonstrating value, particularly about the value of the co-curricular student experience. As Carmen puts it,

> I think the hope, though, is that it's so we can do our work well, know what's going well, know what's not, and then change it. But I think with budget cuts and with things changing at institutions broadly, and then obviously here at ASU specifically, I think

> more and more it’s because we want to show that we're doing good work and that we’re impacting the student experience.

A few other participants shared that, from their perspective, assessment is also about a level of accountability. Elena said, “I guess it’s just a way for us to check to make sure that our work is actually doing what it’s supposed to be doing.” Sam also articulated, “having a vigorous assessment program is part of accountability, it’s accountability for higher education.” Emily used the phrase, “keep tabs on what we are doing” and Rosemary, too, spoke of the pressure in higher education, both internally and externally to perform and measure it. As she framed it, “to be able to answer that question, ‘How do you know?’”

Just through this one question about the purpose of assessment in higher education from a basic level, the responses from the participants provide insight suggesting that assessment is multi-faceted in its purpose as well as what it intends to achieve for student affairs. Next, I share the participants’ thoughts around the notion of assessment data use.

Use

Later in each interview, I asked the participants about the concept of assessment data use by referencing the cycle of assessment (Suskie, 2012) and asking what *use* means to them or minimally comes to mind. I followed that line of questioning; asking what might have informed their working definition. I intentionally shared the participants’ definitions of what data use means to them at the beginning of the findings section. Throughout the interviews, when reflecting on their experiences, participants subsequently shared various forms of assessment data use that were not explicitly mentioned when they originally stated what data use means to them. Through the interviews with the participants, a few common themes help to explain their level of understanding of the concept of assessment and data use and what influenced that construct.

As one might expect there is not just one way that participants describe the term "data use." Carmen described data use in two different ways, one as an instrumental form of use and one as conceptual. She said, "I am literally using information to make changes to the curriculum, but I think just in the discovery process, like learning about what is happening, what students are learning, that's using the results as well." ˙Gina, Dana, Rosemary, and Joe all described use as some sort of a change, adjustment, modification, or improvement in a program, service, or student learning. Joe shared,

> So, using the results, I think there should be a change of some sort…. There should be an adjustment, an improvement, whether that's about process efficiencies, whether that's about adjusting content of curriculums, but it should lead to some kind of change of behavior, of program or curricular design.

While Elena also described the concept of data use initially as some form of implementation of what was learned from the assessment, she went on to reflect that assessment does not always lead to programmatic change, saying,

> I would say an adjustment of a program to kind of meet a particular need that was expressed and maybe wasn't known prior to assessment or – yeah, I don't think it necessarily always has to be a change, but just knowing that that information is informing either the decision to maintain, like to keep something or to change something or to stop doing something within a program.

Here, Elena suggests that data use can also mean to keep or maintain what is being done with a program or service. Similarly, Dana believes that sometimes assessment use can mean reaffirming what you are already doing, perhaps justifying how a program or service is being delivered. This notion of affirmation fits into Jonson, et al.'s (2015) possible effects of influence that act a mediator between the process or findings of an assessment and the programs associated with an assessment.

Leo, on the other hand, pushed a bit against what he framed as assessment use for advocacy:

> I think it needs to be primarily around making decisions to make change within a department or within a program because that's what the data is most tethered to. But I think that piece of wanting to use data for advocacy or for other external purposes and not for direct use within departmental decision-making is something I fight against a little bit.

Emily talked about use in terms of results and going to the end of a report and asking, "What did you do with it? That's what use means to me. What's the action piece?" What is interesting about Emily's response is that as she clearly defined what use means to her, in terms of action and data use being findings-based, she then immediately shifted to talking about her observation of transformation in the assessment facilitators themselves in a powerful way:

> I've supervised quite a few people who – we could rotate who does the assessment project and I would say every single one of them, there's been an "a ha" moment where I've seen that they understand their job in a new way. And often what happens, they understand now that there is a call, like a charge that they didn't know before and they need to rise to it because they found the gap in what they're doing and now it becomes their own. So it's not me saying, "I've looked at the numbers and…", it's them saying, "Well, the [program], we get these numbers, but people don't follow up after they come back, and it says they want to, we need to do something," – so they feel like it becomes their own. So through use I think becomes a higher sense of investment and a different sense of integration.

Her description is representative of Jonson, et al.'s (2015) framework where they describe their third dimension of influence, results of influence, where a possible outcome might be personal transformation in the form of empowerment, change in beliefs, or motivation.

Finally, Joe thoughtfully reflected on what data use means from his perspective and how it relates to the project led by his department. He captures the essence of the practice of assessment data use in talking about the community involved with his department's project:

> What was really helpful in this project was that there were so many external folks that we had to include in this that using the results really was about spending time in community with others, broadening understanding, and then making shifts and changes. I'll say in previous assessment projects that we've done that have been internal, that have been about evaluating what student leaders maybe learn in the student leader role, using the results often doesn't feel as – didn't feel as significant, right?

It is interesting that Joe articulates that the level of significance changes between previous assessments, which had been more internally focused, compared to the assessment project that involved external stakeholders who were involved in discussions about the assessment and findings at different points in the process.

In my conversations, it is apparent the staff's understanding of why assessment takes place in higher education is broader than just program improvement. Similarly, in my discussions with the participants about the notion of assessment data use, there was a primary emphasis on change in the form of improvement, but as they continued in their explanations, they also described other forms of use often not recognized in student affairs assessment literature or by student affairs assessment professionals who design assessment report templates. While they described different forms of use, they did not have the language to articulate it as such. So where does their understanding of assessment and data use come from? The next section introduces the thematic results and provides insight into the first theme regarding how their individual lens and professional backgrounds influence the ways in which they understand and operationalize assessment and data use.

Thematic Results

While the study centered on an overarching research question and five associated sub-questions, the findings for the study will be presented as a whole, organized under five main themes. Within each theme, sub-themes are also presented which provide nuanced insights into the experiences of the participants about the practice of data use. Five broad themes emerged from the coding process between the document analysis and interviews, which I will discuss in further detail:

(1) What Informs the Construct of Use?

(2) Beyond Instrumental Use

(3) People, Organizational Processes, and Rewards

(4) Assessment Data Use at Different Levels of the Organization

(5) Impact of Time

What Informs the Construct of Use?

One of the primary elements that I wanted to explore through this study is how student affairs professionals involved with assessment have come to understand the concept of assessment data use and how they perceive that data use has been put into practice. In order to better understand what informs student affairs staff members' understanding of the concept of data use, it is important to tease out what experiences or information might have informed these working-construct definitions about use and assessment in general. Within this first theme, What Informs the Construct of Use, two sub-themes collectively help describe how and where participants' understanding of assessment and assessment data use has been informed: Lens and

Context of Professional Background, and Reinforcement through Divisional Assessment Templates.

Lens and Context of Professional Background. In all instances, what participants described about assessment data use came from the lens they bring to their current work in higher education, be that their educational background or from their past professional experiences. Consistent with the idea of social constructivism, people's lives and experience shape how the view and understand the world. The same can be said through this case study about the participants understanding of assessment data use.

Educational & Professional Background. There are two ways in which the participants' backgrounds helped shape their understanding around assessment and data use. The first has to do with the educational disciplines they bring to their work in student affairs. Only three of the nine participants have a Master's degree or PhD specifically in higher education or student affairs, whereas others are bringing perspectives from their own disciplines and professional background as they make meaning of assessment in higher education. Dana and Sam bring their clinical background, Emily's has a social justice bent to her work, and Leo's social work background informs his work in assessment in many ways. In our conversation, Leo shared how his background colors his particular lens with regards to assessment:

> So I think the other thing that is distinctive about my focus, I don't want to say unique, but I think distinctive is, as a social worker, I view everything through the lens of intervention. So, data helps inform intervention and in the non-profit world, in the social work world, you don't get funding if you don't have data not just to prove your impact, but to indicate that what you're doing is reasonable and is informed by something that has a high likelihood of success. So, I bring that with me to this understanding that assessment data should help us design better educational interventions that let us achieve the educational outcome that we're looking for related to the development of knowledge, skills, and values.

Leo also mentioned that while in his master's program in social work, the word "assessment" meant something different as compared to his work in higher education as someone leading a student learning outcome assessment initiative. Sam also felt his psychology training provided him with a framework for basic assessment skills in student affairs through "…the psychometric part of our training…synthesizing data, local data, meaning the on-the-ground experience of our client with national data, synthesizing different data sources."

Rosemary shared that a formal training or understanding of assessment was not part of her educational background. Nonetheless, she, Olivia, Leo, Joe, Dana, Carmen, Sam, and Emily each referenced the research methods or evaluation courses they had taken, primarily during their PhD programs or their master's programs, and how that informed their understanding. Each response indicated that they drew upon what the learned in these courses, including methodology, project design, and data collection techniques, to connect to assessment work. Carmen spoke about her master's degree in education, explaining that those classes were more focused on K-12 teaching, and recalled talking about student learning outcomes and using Bloom's taxonomy in some of those courses. Dana reflected on her qualitative dissertation saying that she believes it had the greatest impact on informing her approach to conducting her department's assessment project. While the assessment project she led was primarily mixed methods, she suggested that the qualitative component and thematic coding was not far removed from how she conducts therapy sessions and listens to clients.

As staff were speaking about their backgrounds related to assessment, there was a commonality among more seasoned professionals in student affairs who suggested that there was not as much emphasis on assessment as there is in today's student affairs preparation programs.

Joe reflected on this and how the perceived lack of assessment capacity by some staff might translate into resistance:

> There's some real power to doing student learning assessment, there's a real gap in knowledge in the field of student affairs and being able to conduct that. In my experience, folks will usually agree that this is important work and that we should be doing assessment work; and yet I would guess that most will say that they're not comfortable with their own skill level and they're not – they may not – often don't feel like we have either the ability to tap into resources to improve those skills or more likely it's the time, right, that we can step away from the day-to-day work we do to build this capacity of our own. And so I think that what sometimes presents as a resistance to assessment is actually a discomfort with one's own knowledge and it's hard to be a director or an AVP or a VP and acknowledge our own shortcomings or limitations in an area that we tout as being so critically important to being taken seriously as a field. But the reality is our programs haven't always – at least those of us that are in director and above leadership positions and have been in the field for 15 to 30 years.

Olivia also similarly noted how far the field has come in terms of embracing assessment, noting that today's higher education and student affairs graduate programs are providing more focused courses on assessment and research that are preparing student affairs professionals in ways previous graduates were not, regardless if they are entering an assessment position, a specialized role, or a generalist role in student affairs. Wise and Aaron (2015) echo Joe and Olivia's comments about there being a divide in which mid-level and senior level staff have had less exposure to assessment, skill development, and hands on experience when compared to younger staff who recently came out of student affairs or higher education master's programs.

Coursework was not the only reference point for the participants when it came to what informed their understanding of assessment and data use. Carmen, Rosemary, Olivia, and Joe attribute some of their learning about assessment to higher education professional associations, conferences, and books. Olivia also mentioned being part of network of professionals who were also building assessment programs within student affairs at their institutions at that time, as well as colleagues in academic affairs and institutional research at ASU who have been supportive of the student affairs assessment initiative and provided support over the years. Beyond the staff's educational background and coursework, on-the-job learning also contributed to their understanding of assessment and data use.

Learn by doing. The second way the participants' backgrounds shaped their perspective about data use is through their professional experiences. With limited or non-existent formal assessment training, much of what the participants attribute to their understanding of assessment came from previous experience on the job and making connections between programmatic evaluations and or research. Olivia, Joe, Carmen, and Leo all spoke about programs and workshops they led and how creating post-program evaluations helped them learn about assessment and shape their understanding of data use. Leo shared, "I think it probably comes from a combination of the better part of my professional experience being a workshop facilitator coupled with – I mean thinking about if I use data, I always used data to improve a workshop so that made sense to me." Similarly, Carmen said, "And then, really, I think some of my first experiences with assessment were around program evaluation, evaluating individual programs and large programs – large-scale academic programs, but literal 'res-life' programs, programming in the residence halls. So that was really kind of those first experiences." Emily said that she learned about assessment when she was part of a research team in her master's program:

> So I was out in community organizations, mainly [in the city] interviewing people, women really, who were on the fringe and talking about their experience and getting all kinds of skills, but I didn't really understand at the time, we actually wrote – helped write a paper that was used by a community organization and it did change some policies, so it was really exciting. So that was really kind of on the ground and I saw community

> change come through it which I think I needed to do because I think then, when I got into more of the academics, particularly in clinical social work, sometimes it can be like what is the point of this, you know? So I saw how assessment and evaluation of programs can bring about movement.

For most of the participants, ASU has been the place that they have truly gained assessment skills. Joe shared, “And then here at ASU, having a more structured divisional approach has allowed me to gain more [assessment] skill.” Similarly, Leo said,

> Really, I learned on the job here. So it was through my experience as essentially a director of a department, because when I was first hired I was the associate director of [an office]. In that capacity, I was expected to think about using data to improve the workshops we were developing and the outcomes we were looking for. So, through the experience as a department head thinking about, okay, in order to do what I want, I need to have data to do it, so my first experiences were developing glorified satisfaction surveys that I called assessment because that seemed familiar. But then it was through some coaching with the associate vice president that I reported to at the time, coupled with conversations with the assessment staff in student affairs talking about how do we collect data to do certain things. Those were really pivotal roles.

Two of the participants, Carmen and Leo, have participated in ASU’s assessment certificate program, which is open to all faculty and staff looking to learn about student learning outcomes assessment. As a part of its curriculum, the assessment certificate program has participants complete a culminating assessment project. Carmen reflected,

> So I guess some of my learning around assessment came from my master’s and then some of it just came from practice, just trying things out and seeing what information I was getting back. And then when I came to All Saints, things got real serious with assessment, I was like, whoa, this is – whoa, okay. Here though at ASU, when I came here, I was like, okay, people are – we're being asked, we need to provide reports and things. So, when I realized that I was like, I need to get – I need some development.

Sam and Carmen have both served on the assessment committee for multiple years giving them insight into various assessment projects as well as a deeper understanding of how the divisional assessment staff frame the meaning of data use. For Elena, leading her department’s assessment project was her first foray into assessment work and student-learning outcomes, so the support she received from Leo, Olivia, the divisional assessment committee, and the divisional assessment templates helped foster her understanding of both assessment and data use. In this next sub-theme, "What Informs the Construct of Use," I focus on the role of the assessment templates and how those documents created by the assessment staff also define what constitutes *use* and how assessment data use was framed for these projects.

Reinforcement through Divisional Assessment Templates. The level of support and guidance that Olivia, Leo, and the Assessment Committee provide to departments, and specifically the assessment project facilitators, is quite remarkable and has contributed to a culture of assessment within student affairs at ASU. One of the primary ways the committee provided guidance to the facilitators in creating their assessment project plans and final assessment reports was using detailed templates with specific prompts shared with the facilitators. These documents help the staff think through the elements of their plans and reports. Leo noted, "…One of the other things that I've spent a lot of time thinking about in terms of templates has been trying to break down each thing and that might even have become clear in the documents that I've sent." The detailed assessment project plan, report, and poster templates help to passively yet directly shape the framework for the participants to view assessment as primarily instrumental based upon how *use* is framed. It was through the interviews and in conversations about their projects that other forms of *use* were being discussed, forms that would fall outside of the traditional instrumental or direct use of assessment results to inform improvements or change. Nonetheless, what was discussed would not fit into the template parameters of what constitutes *use*.

This case study incorporated two methods of data collection: document analysis and semi-structure interviewers. I began data collection and analysis by examining select documents at the divisional and departmental level that either informed the overall case or that specifically served as the artifacts related to each department included in the study. In total, thirteen documents were reviewed. The documents that were specifically reviewed at the divisional level included the assessment project plan template, the assessment report template, the assessment project rubric, and the Assessment Symposium poster template. The departmental documents that I reviewed included documents related to the three departments that served as the focus of this study, specifically their assessment project plan, their assessment report, and their Assessment Symposium poster. I reviewed these in order to explore how the assessment data use was articulated, if at all, in their documents.

The Assessment Project Plan Template is a document developed by the divisional assessment staff and serves as the first point of information about each unit's assessment project and their initial plans in a given year. The Project Plan is a twenty-nine-question template that is organized into three primary focus areas: developing the question, methodology, and sharing the results and timeline. It is through this document that the staff member indicates which student learning outcome(s) the department plans to assess and to what program or service it is directly connected, as well as what method(s) the assessment facilitator is considering for their project. A few things are important to note with this document. First, it demonstrates the level of support that the Division provides to staff facilitating the annual projects in order to provide such detailed prompts in the planning phase. Second, this and the subsequent templates reviewed set the tone for what is valued or how the division defines what constitutes data use. Assessment facilitators submitting this plan are expected to answer the question, "What improvements or decisions do you anticipate this project will help your department make to support student success?" as well as, "By what month do you need to make decisions based on the results of your project in order to influence changes for the next iteration of your program?" Such prompts serve as passive but direct ways of defining *use* in terms that would constitute instrumental use and establishing that there is a particular timeframe within which decisions would be made as a result of the assessment. Lastly, there are four questions within the template that focus on the time element of the assessment project to ensure the project is feasible and stays on track to be completed within the designated annual timeline.

The second template, which also serves as the framework, is the assessment report template which all assessment project facilitators use to write their assessment reports. The assessment staff have created a seven-section template that includes an abstract, assessment question, introduction and context, data collection and methodology, data and findings, discussion and interpretation of findings, and recommendations and plans for action. In total there are close to fifty prompts in this document that helps the assessment facilitator know what exactly should be included in each of the seven sections. It is the way in which those prompts are asked that helps guide the assessment facilitators in how *use* should be presented.

Olivia and Leo both mentioned that one particular prompt, which had been intermittently included in the assessment report template over the years, made a return in 2016-17. This prompt, provided in the first section of the report, actually references back to the prior year's assessment project and is posed to the department director: "Based on the recommendations and planned actions from last year's assessment report, please describe what specific actions were taken as well as the results of these actions." While this prompt provides for some longer-term accountability and demonstrates the division's interest in what impact a given assessment had, the prompt is an example of how results-based instrumental use is deemed as the standard for data use. Similarly, in the abstract section of the assessment report template, facilitators are asked to include what steps will occur as a result of the assessment project implications. Likewise, there is a specific section of the assessment report known as the "Action Plan" where facilitators are asked to complete the following: "Based on the results of the assessment project (findings and interpretations), please share a specific plan of action to implement the recommendations stated above." Specifically, facilitators are asked to include the steps required for implementation of each recommendation, a timeline to implement the recommendations, and any barriers the department might factor into the implementation process. Each of these prompts are examples of findings-based instrumental use that Kirkhart (2000) described as being privileged over other forms of assessment data use.

Alternatively, in the "Discussion and Interpretation of Findings" section of the assessment report template, two of the prompts do ask about what they learned from the assessment, as well as what findings, if any, surprised them. Both of these prompts could be seen as conceptual use. Dana spoke of how this template was of help to her as a first-time assessment project facilitator:

> …Leo's templates, like the action plan and then how it had the specific sections for what I needed to write up, not only helped me know what I needed to include but I think the more important function that served for me was really helping me know, okay, I don't need – this doesn't need to be a dissertation. It is – something that I was worried about when I took this project on was coming up with a research question that was way too big and way too involved and demanding for what I had the resources for to do here. So, having these specific headings and these specific questions really helped me narrow in

> and just do the sort of project that I have the time and resources for and not overextend myself.

A third template that assessment facilitators are provided is associated with their posters for the Assessment Symposium. All departments use the same poster template for the event. Two of the sections, “Key Findings” and “Plan of Action,” relate to the concept of data use. In the “Key Findings” section, facilitators are asked to include four bulleted statements about “the most powerful results that directly contribute to intended next steps as a result of your project.” Similarly, in the “Plan of Action” section, facilitators are asked to provide 3-4 bulleted statements that address, “What do you plan to do next? This is the most important part of ‘closing the loop’ for the assessment process. Consider things such as: specific program modifications, creation of new initiatives, sharing results with specific stakeholders, or even repeating the same assessment with specific modifications.” Through such prompts and templates, the divisional assessment staff emphasize the utility of these projects and help the facilitators to reflect on the impact. At the same time, though, it is reinforcing the idea that *use* is tied to results or findings and that what the staff is looking for most are direct improvements, modifications, or changes that will occur as a result of the assessment project. It should be noted that they do indicate one form of process use by including the example of repeating the assessment with modifications. One of the areas that I have explored through this study is the way in which staff members’ perception of what is deemed as assessment data use based upon how *use* is framed in the division’s assessment process, particularly in the supporting documents and assessment project templates, might inhibit how assessment use from the projects is being described by the assessment project facilitators in their reports. Carmen suggested that anything other than instrumental use might not be acceptable based upon the prompts associated with an action plan. She said,

> I think that because it's called "Action Plan," it makes it seem like you must take action and that if you put in the action plan that it confirmed what we knew or it confirmed the value or the utility or the effectiveness of this program. So our action plan is to keep doing what we're doing. I don't know if it's just my perception, but I feel like that's not acceptable. I feel like it's weird because failing or making mistakes doesn't really seem acceptable either, so to say in your action plan, "We learned we are not doing this well and we are going to do it better," it seems like that's what that section is looking for, but at the same time, I don't feel like we're super open about, "We were doing a bad job at things."

When speaking with Leo, I asked him if the templates and prompts might possibly inform what type of assessment data use the division is looking for from the departments when it comes to these projects. He responded,

> I think it's very possible that that's happening, and I mean I don't necessarily know if I think that that's entirely bad that that's how I'm privileging the use of usage. I mean, when I think about everything I've been telling you before, my background as an interventionist, my approach to things, yeah, that definitely is consistent with my belief around it, so perhaps it would be wise of me to think about that and the consequence of that.

He went on to say this about direct instrumental use versus other forms of *use*:

> Without direct intention to use it to make program-level improvement, I would find that insufficient and I would – and if I were to see that, maybe I have seen that, I don't remember, I would probably give that explicit feedback to say, "Great, but you collected the data because you wanted to learn something about your program, so what are you doing with it?"

Lastly, the divisional assessment committee members are assigned each assessment project and they use a rubric to evaluate and rate each project based on a set of criteria related to the following areas: learning outcome assessed, data collection and methodology, analysis/interpretation of results, and recommendations and plans for action. In this last area, the criteria include clarity around a plan of action based specifically on assessment results, the inclusion of a timeline for implementation, and addressing potential barriers. These criteria do not leave room for non-instrumental, non-findings-based use that stems from conducting the assessment project. If an assessment facilitator included non-action-oriented implications or focused on what was learned, the assessment committee member evaluating the project would not assign as many points to the project.

I would be remiss if I failed to adequately recognize that the templates provided by the divisional assessment staff are helpful, thorough, and provide guidance, particularly for staff who are newer to assessment, demystifying the process and making the facilitation of these projects more palatable and grounded in support. Elena, as a first-time assessment facilitator and someone who, by her own admission, is new to assessment, had this to say about the templates:

> Well, I think that all of the forms that we received gave very good instructions of, okay, this is what you should be including. When we originally got the forms, there would be a part of it that would be in red font and it would say, okay, erase this, but it gave me a sense of, okay, this is what I'm supposed to include here, or this is what this means. So I thought it was really helpful to kind of have those templates.

That said, the templates also do communicate, from a divisional perspective, what constitutes *use* and what should come from these assessment projects. As such, this might have a limiting effect on how staff come to understand and operationalize data use as it pertains to these learning outcomes-based assessment projects.

In exploring assessment data use, it is clear that staff members bring their individual previous experiences, educational discipline, and past work experience that help to inform their understanding of what constitutes *use* and how they approach assessment. Additionally, the divisional assessment staff, particularly Leo, have spent significant time and effort in creating multiple templates that help walk the staff through the planning and reporting process in developing these reports. While helpful, there should be recognition that how *use* is framed and what staff might be asked to include in their planning and reporting help to shape how assessment data use is operationalized.

Beyond Instrumental Use

Embarking on this study, one central question focused on what different types of assessment data use might be associated with the assessment initiative and annual projects at ASU. This second theme incorporates the various types of data use not limited to instrumental use that participants described when discussing their assessment projects. While the types of *use* described in this section might seem commonplace to people in the field of evaluation (e.g. Caracelli 2000; Mark & Henry, 2004; Leviton & Hughes; 1981, Patton, 2008; Weiss, 1977), what constitutes assessment use within Student Affairs, or at least how it is described in normative student affairs assessment literature, is not as nuanced or differentiated as in the field of evaluation. Through both the assessment project templates and reports, as well as through the interviews with staff, I framed how *use* was referenced into evaluation data use taxonomies. In doing so, some level of instrumental use was described as a result of conducting the assessment projects, but it is not the only type of *use* that the participants described in the study. In this section, I share how respondents described assessment use as instrumental, process, conceptual, and symbolic forms of use. I also explain how, in those descriptions, they found value in conducting their respective projects, yet articulation of that value in other forms of *use* was absent from their assessment report and assessment poster.

Instrumental. Each department articulated examples of instrumental use that were directly cited within the various assessment project reports. Through the interviews with staff, though, instrumental use seemed more likely to be articulated by the assessment facilitator who oversees the assessment project more so than the director of the respective department, and instrumental use was definitely not referenced at the senior level of the division, as will be discussed in a later section. One possible explanation found in this study recognizes assessment facilitators' dual relationship between leading their respective assessment project while also managing the program that was the focus of the assessment. These staff members are in direct control of making decisions about the programs they lead.

In this study, there are several examples of instrumental use. The assessment project that Carmen led took place over the course of two years. The first year of the assessment was designed as a pilot that resulted in changes to the assessment tool itself, so the action plan that year included what constituted process use, whereas in the subsequent and culminating year of Carmen's assessment project, she explicitly laid out the curricular changes that had been made to the co-curricular course which was the focus of the assessment. Specifically, within the assessment report action plan for the First Year Experience, Carmen shared six curricular changes or improvements to the first-year seminar program. Some of the changes Carmen referenced in the department report included removing redundant content based on students pre-semester knowledge; refining and prioritizing course content that is most pertinent to their first semester in college, as well as adding content to the end of the semester course content that focuses on students planning for the remainder of their last year; and incorporating active learning strategies and reflection to assist in the students' learning.

Elena and the Community Service Office articulated instrumental use through their assessment report in two ways. The first was based on a prompt within the assessment report template that asked each department to provide a follow-up to the recommendations and action plan from the previous year's report where they included what changes were made to the program. Second, and directly relevant to this study, Elena explained that, based on the students' lowest average score associated with the concept of living simply, the modifications that were planned to be incorporated into the program included adding intentional weekly reflections focused on this concept of simplicity and living authentically, adding a specific session at the program's fall retreat emphasizing this concept, and engaging explicitly via one-on-one conversations with the students. Lastly, a planned change included adding more support and structure in order to further connect the students with their community partners as a way to model engaging in advocacy work.

For Dana's outreach project, the action plan was less instrumental and change focused, but more in line with process use and the concept of changes to assessment practices through the recommendation that more evaluative tools be used with outreach programs moving forward. Out of the four items included in their plan of action, only one constitutes instrumental use. While the students were demonstrating learning of the intended information, a recommended change included incorporating a greater focus on practical, behavioral, skills-based use of self-care strategies within the outreach presentations.

What is interesting is that when asking the participants in the study what they believed *use* means, it skewed toward instrumental use; yet, when unpacking their experience with the assessment process and what *use* looks like, the type of assessment use shifted to other forms describe in the subsequent sections. This finding is important in moving toward a more comprehensive look at what constitutes assessment data use within student affairs.

Process. Process use is not about the findings, but instead captures what is gained through the process of conducting an assessment (Patton, 2008). This second form of *use* seems to be more acceptable in terms of forms of assessment data use that may come out of the departmental assessment projects. A number of the staff interviewed described process use. For example, Sam describe what came from his department's project:

> What came out of this was more than just outcomes, but it was more like – like, "How do we collect data on who we're reaching?" and, "Are forms accurate and comprehensive enough?" But we have implemented some changes in terms of how we measure even our – how we collect data on who we're – who the population is, how big is it? So we have a new outreach form in our recordkeeping system, so we're tracking outreach more carefully.

Dana expounded on Sam's comments, saying,

> Something that I was noticing even as I was creating the assessment, the assessment pieces, and then conducting the assessment was – there weren't the organizational structures in place that I thought there should be in terms of having some sort of database on our shared drive that keeps track of all of the outreach that we do. I was noticing more areas for improvement logistically in our outreach programming more so than kind of the actual outreach that we were doing if that makes sense.

Elena also discussed 'aha' moments she was having while she was in the process conducting the assessment and making some conclusions:

> I mean I think inevitably with interviews, right, as you're hearing this for the first time I definitely – there were things popping into my head of, "Oh, that's really interesting!" or I think even just the way in which students spoke about what community meant for them or what it means to fight injustice. I guess some of the thoughts that came into my head in just those discussions and hearing it from students is, "How are we talking about these things in a way that's legible and understandable to students, knowing that they're coming from maybe a different experience than myself?" Right? And even the language that they use is different and that's for a reason, right? There's a generation gap. So that's one example that I can think of as I was just hearing them speak.

Beyond instrumental use, one type of process use even has a place in the assessment templates provided to the staff. Specifically, in the assessment poster template, staff are given the option of expressing process use within the action plan section of the poster. One of the examples provided by the staff through the form was "or even repeating the same assessment with specific modifications" as an option for a type of action that might be taken from a project. Thus, it is not about the findings from the project, but about a place to articulate what they learned from the process of conducting the assessment and how they might do it differently in the future. Leo also emphasized that process use is an acceptable form of *use*, though he suggested it should be an alternative in a case where instrumental use was not be the result of the assessment project. According to Leo,

> …if your plan of action isn't around changes you're going to make to your program because of what you know, then you should at least be able to talk about changes you'd make to assessment so that way, you can do that for next time. So even if you don't do the project next year, the next time you do it you can say, "We assessed this before, what did we learn so that way we do it better." Not all departments take me up on that and so that's not always reflected in the posters or the reports. We talk about it, though.

Leo was touching on a possible form of process use that may come through facilitating the assessment projects as a result of lessons learned which could impact future assessment methodology or tweaks to the assessment approach should the assessment project be replicated in the future.

The most salient example of process use in the form of improving upon an assessment was the project that Carmen led over a two-year period. Specifically, the main outcome of the project conducted in the first year was truly a pilot of the assessment where the main goal was to use what was learned to adjust and improve the assessment in year two. According to Carmen,

> It was really about sitting down with Olivia and Leo and then – and all of us, I think, coming to the realization that this is a big project and we should probably have more confidence in the tool before we rely so heavily on the data. So, although it was not planned to be a pilot, it ended up being a pilot as the project evolved a little bit.

While it may not have been the first thought Olivia had while discussing assessment data use, when asked about the benefits of assessment, she said,

> I haven't mentioned the individuals involved, but that is huge part of assessment, of the learning. It is not just learning about students learning, it is about learning about our own learning. And so that often is the case if someone has done a project and then realizes, "Oh well, this was the wrong way to ask this question," or, "I would have done such and such differently when I do my next project." So that – that learning is key.

Olivia went on to discuss how process use was an important early outcome of the divisional assessment projects as staff were learning how to conduct and become more confident in engaging with assessment. As Olivia put it,

> You know, and that is interesting because again, working with assessment for so many years now, I think early on we focused a lot, especially as we were starting, on the idea that assessment is just as much about your own learning as it is about what the students are learning.

Similarly, Elena very much captured how, in her first assessment projects, process use played a big part in the value she got from leading the project. She said,

> I mean, I think that as someone who didn't have much experience with assessment, I definitely saw the value in taking time to do this. I know originally when we started and they were like, "Okay, you're the one who is the point person for assessment this year," I just felt like, "Oh, I have so much on my plate and I don't know how I'm going to do this!" But I thought that I grew a lot in the process and definitely because of the support that I had and feel more confident about using sort of other ways of assessing my programs and not just feeling like, "Oh okay, I just have to have this evaluation, but thinking more about, okay, let's – maybe we need to look at the questions and do we have to change questions, like what do we really want to learn from this, what feedback do we really – you know, what are we trying to do with our forms? So, I think it gave me a very different perspective and I'm definitely more confident in the skills that I acquired.

Just as Olivia suggested, part of having staff engage in these projects goes beyond improving programs and services. It also provides staff with hands-on experience in developing assessment skills and developing confidence around conducting assessment. Leo echoed this sentiment about the value of the process leading to greater organizational culture saying, “But I think the process is absolutely useful because, again, it’s about culture development. It’s culture building.”

This concept of confidence and personal growth came through in multiple interviews. The notion of learning how to do assessment, skills development, and confidence building around assessment is an important part of the culture that has been developed at ASU. Henning and Roberts (2015), Wise and Aaron (2015), and Schuh et al. (2016) all suggest capacity-building is important for student affairs professionals to incorporate into their divisions. Just as the assessment movement in student affairs has matured, and just as an emphasis in student affairs assessment literature has been prescriptive in some ways about how to conduct assessment, the assessment initiative at ASU has placed value on developing staff assessment capacity. This skill-development is one example that Jonson et al. (2015) frame as a result of assessment influence. Rosemary captured the essence of process data use best in discussing the skills developed, saying,

> One key piece is confidence. Many times they were starting brand new and not having much experience with assessment, so seeing them own the process, seeing them being able to speak the language, number one. Number two, skills, skill development, skill – understanding what assessment is, yeah, and how to conduct it and what's beneficial. So I have watched some of them, they will question each other or the value or ask, “Is that really a valid data point?” I'm not sure they would be able to do that without kind of going through this assessment process. So, there's the process of assessment itself and we have to be comfortable with it because we are going to be at the table of other folks,

> whether it’s the financial folks or the academic folks, who also have that kind of understanding, so we've got to be able to speak that language.

Joe, as Carmen’s supervisor, spoke to what Rosemary was describing and reflected on what he saw in his own staff member leading a project:

> What was really helpful was to watch Carmen manage the facilitation of this project for two years in a row and to see her build on her own knowledge of what the process looks like and what to expect from the process and how to ask questions or ask for assistance when she had limited understanding of how to accomplish some step of the project.

From the perspective of an assessment project facilitator, Dana recalled realizing the value of the project while she was working on writing up her assessment report:

> I do remember having the experience of sitting down when I was interpreting the findings and writing up all of that, like, “Oh, I actually got a lot more from this than I thought!” But what I got wasn’t necessarily from the actual assessment that I did. It was in the act of creating the assessment that I feel like I got most of the data and kind of the areas for growth.

The confidence and growth that Rosemary, Joe, and Dana describe echo observations already shared by Emily about the transformational nature of leading an assessment project. It is not just about the program or service being assessed, what is learned about the student experience, how they might be able to change the program, or how the results might be used politically. A very important element that might get overlooked when talking about student affairs assessment is what happens to the person or people engaging with assessment. Carmen shared her personal reflection of how this growth has and will impact her work as a student affairs professional:

> Yeah, I definitely think the experience has improved my skills around assessment. So that’s been a big benefit, a big piece of it. I think at a very basic level, you know, I hope that one day when I'm in job interviews, this is something that I can talk about. It’s definitely something that’s on my resume, just being – completing the assessment certificate, being nominated for awards related to it. So I think, yeah, the benefits have

> been great. And I think especially when people are talking about the value of student affairs and the need for assessment that having this really tangible experience to talk about hopefully will help down the road.

Even Leo, as the divisional assessment coordinator, proudly described how he has personally benefited from skills development over the course of supporting departments in the form of learning how to conduct a McNemar's test through the experience of supporting Carmen with her project.

Conceptual. The third type of assessment data use that was mentioned while speaking with the participants was conceptual data use. Sometimes referred to as enlightenment, this form of *use* is not about how a program or service is changed or improved, how a person is changed as a result of leading the assessment, or how the assessment methodology may be improved. Instead, it is about a new understanding that is gained and what is learned about the population, program, or service being assessed. Compared to instrumental and process data use, conceptual data use was not mentioned as much through the interviews.

In both the assessment project plan template and the final assessment report template, one of the prompts does speak to conceptual use. From what is expected to be learned at the point of planning, to describing what was learned from the assessment and how it contributes to the department or division of student affairs in the final report, this notion of assessment contributing to a new understanding is relevant. Although it falls within the findings and interpretation section of the report, the expectation, based on how the report template is written, is that action will come from the assessment. It does not appear that simply stating what was learned from the assessment is sufficient unless there is some identifiable and articulated action that results from conducting the assessment project. Yet in speaking with the participants in the study, conceptual use, even without naming it as such, has value.

Olivia shared that one of the goals of the divisional assessment process is to understand the ways in which the units are contributing to divisional learning. Leo also spoke to the value that conceptual use has in assessment, saying, “I think in most cases it becomes a blessing for folks to say, ‘I know a lot more about this program than I did before and that’s really valuable.’” Rosemary spoke about the importance of assessment in higher education for student affairs professionals to better understand their roles and impact on the student experience. Similarly, Sam shared his belief how assessment brings about understanding what students are learning,

> One, I think there was just a sense of like, you know, do we even know what's happening with the outcomes of outreach is? Because we're not really assessing them. You know, we might have some rudimentary satisfaction data, but in terms of like outcomes assessment, that wasn’t happening. So, from my perspective as a director, you know what I'm interested in is what are people learning - what are people getting out of this, you know? Are they getting something that is a tangible kind of take-away?

Like Sam, Carmen also articulated a similar sentiment:

> Those were the two main goals because we never really knew what was happening in The Common Hour, what students were learning. So that was really the focus, just getting a handle on that and understanding, being able to share that out because there was lots of pressure around changing The Common Hour and I didn’t feel like I could do that because I didn’t really know what – I knew people’s feedback on it who have been in the program but I didn’t have any sense of what students were learning.

She went onto say, “But I think just in the discovery process, like learning about what's happening in The Common Hour, what students are learning, that’s using the results as well.”

Along with developing a new understanding based on an assessment, there was a reoccurring thought around confirmation that came from an assessment. As used here, confirmation means there was something the staff already knew anecdotally about the student experience or what they were learning, but the assessment confirmed their understanding. Dana shared her thoughts on confirmation, saying, “Although sometimes assessment can just be reaffirming what you're doing, and I realize that and that’s a good thing, and I guess in our case there were some like, ‘Yeah, we actually are teaching these things.’” Carmen echoed this thought when talking about the assessment project she led: “I think in some ways it’s confirmed kind of what orientation hopes students walk away with so we can say, kind of more confidently, what orientation is accomplishing by looking at the pre-results.”

Like process use, the staff were clearly describing another form of *use* in terms of their learning, and this form of *use*, although it has merits, has not found a place within the discussion around the assessment projects. From being able to learn something new about what students are learning from the program they oversee, to being able to confirm anecdotal information with assessment evidence, staff saw this as a form of assessment data use.

Symbolic. In the political environment of higher education, data and the role of assessment can also be politicized, and assessment data is often used as leverage. Through the comments that staff made in relation to symbolic use, the concept of proving value, justifying existence, being at the table, and telling the student affairs story seemed to be a product of having assessment data and sharing it. Typically, however, this would not be included in assessment reports. While not necessarily an intended outcome at the outset of assessment planning, in terms of assessment use, it is important to consider symbolic use, particularly for staff at the director level and above within the division. Emily reflected on her role as a director and how she thinks about assessment, “I'm looking at it much more strategically in terms of who needs to know it, when do they need to know it, how can I use it to leverage?” Similarly, Sam said,

> I think there's PR value with this. When other university officials come [to the Assessment Symposium], even if it's from teaching, learning, and assessment, or if it's our provost that comes, whatever, I think it can raise the profile of student affairs a bit saying that there are outcomes here that we're actually assessing. It shines attention on the metric aspects of our work, or even just there's some measurement of co-curricular experiences. I think it can raise the [bar]. It can sort of elevate student affairs a bit to see, not just that we're faculty, but to take our work a little bit more seriously, especially in a time where we're really scrutinizing everything in terms of the value of various services. So I think that helps, sort of seeing student affairs in a scholarly way and producing scholarly data, having scholarly-type discussions about things.

Rosemary similarly expressed the need to prove the value of student affairs, saying,

> I think personally, and as a leader in the field, I've been very committed to how we keep improving the work that we're doing and knowing within the academy that many times we do have to prove our work. And as higher education is being challenged or constricting, I want to make sure that our story is at least on the table, and the way to benefit that and support that is through our data.

Joe also expressed the idea that assessment can be about proving the work of student affairs:

> So what we find is that when we engage in assessment and we can show what students are able to do or what they have learned through the process of engaging in our programs, we're able to make the case and make adjustments and shifts over time more successfully with our campus partners.

Carmen corroborated this sentiment for her department:

> So I think it's just allowed us to speak to the work, speak to the curriculum in a way that we weren't able to before, and sometimes it feels like it allows us to defend it. Yeah, so that's what I would say outside of what was in the action plan.

Leo shared similar thoughts and related the political nature of assessment to his background in social work, saying,

> …in the social work world, you don't get funding if you don't have data not just to prove your impact but to indicate that what you're doing is reasonable and is informed by something that has a high likelihood of success... I think that piece of wanting to use data for advocacy or for other external purposes and not for direct use within departmental decision making is something I fight against a little bit.

Leo's social work background, along with what I believe has been an indoctrination of the idea that instrumental use should be the primary outcome for student affairs assessment, influenced the lens he brings to assessment work. His view that use of assessment for political purposes is not congruent with the purpose of assessment. Emily, really captured the political nature of data:

> … it's about leveraging, to go back to that word, the information that I have, to bring it to the table and maybe change the narrative because there may well be many assumptions or - I don't mean about a person, I was going to say ignorance - but people just not knowing what we're doing and then not being able to celebrate or challenge because we need to be challenged or to collaborate. So it's got to work at different levels. And so, for me with my job, I think with the data,- like if we're talking about the use of data, - I have to think politically and I have to think strategically and I still have those "aha" moments that Elena might have on the moment. But my job is to kind of tell it in a way people can hear it, you know? If I burst into tears, that's not going to reach some people. But if I'm telling a narrative of fifteen students whose major changed, who stayed at ASU, how and when and like seeking out those opportunities, it's a responsibility.

Lastly, Carmen also articulated the tension that sometimes can exist between student affairs and academic affairs in terms of importance and impact:

> In some ways though, and this is my personal opinion, I feel like we want to compete with the academic side of the house. We want to show that students are learning outside the classroom, too, and so I think that's a piece of it that we kind of want to compete and be at that level.

In terms of symbolic use, assessment data can be a powerful tool in the political landscape of higher education. Often, I hear professionals say to me, "We must do a better job telling the student affairs story." That story can be used as leverage that comes in multiple forms: justifying existence, proving credibility, defending decisions, demonstrating impact, and gaining a seat at the table. As Carmen pointed out, such reasons fall outside of the scope of the division's action plan section of the assessment report. Yet, staff clearly articulated symbolic use as a way in which they engage with assessment data.

Instrumental use is the primary form of use that is most associated with assessment. Perhaps from a purist point of view, if forms of *use* were ranked, it would land at the top in terms of importance based on how assessment and use is defined. Yet in my interviews, all of the participants mentioned multiple forms of use, including process, conceptual, symbolic, or some combination of these. While the specific language around these forms of use were not explicitly articulated by the participants, it is clear that the staff find additional or simultaneous value in assessment data use beyond taking action and making improvements to programs and services. There is an opportunity for student affairs assessment professionals to consider this missed opportunity to more broadly define *use* and provide further prompts to ask staff about the multiple forms of use of data that comes from conducting assessment.

In the next section, I discuss some of the organizational features that impact how student affairs staff engage in the practice of data use.

People, Organizational Processes, & Rewards

A central component to exploring the practice of assessment data use in student affairs was to consider organizational features that either contribute to or detract from student affairs staff members engaging in assessment data use. This section focuses on three elements of the organization: people and relationships, process and structure, and lack of rewards.

People and interaction with others are at the core of the practice of data use, per Coburn and Turner's (2012) framework. It is the interaction with the assessment data between and among people that helps make meaning, and those involved find *use*, regardless of type. Olivia captured this in framing the importance of trust with assessment:

> There was some trust already, which is a very big part of the assessment process, which actually Richard Keeling [editor of Learning Reconsidered] said. The personal piece of assessment is just as important as the knowledge because you can learn the knowledge around doing assessment and doing the different elements but the personalism and the trust is important.

The idea of interaction among colleagues around assessment at ASU takes multiple forms, but primary among them are having an assessment champion, interactions within departments on assessment, and the divisional assessment symposium.

People and Relationships. Beyond the support that assessment facilitators receive directly from Leo and Olivia, an important set of relationships and engagement with assessment happens within respective departments. Olivia reflected on the culture the Division has been creating that speaks to these relationships:

> Our goal within assessment is that you know as many people as possible within departments are involved in the assessment project, so if there's a department doing the assessment project, ideally the colleagues within that department know about it and then those that are affiliated with that program are part and when action plans come out then people are aware.

This recognition by Olivia, who created the assessment process at ASU, demonstrates how at its core, assessment of student learning was not designed to be a solo endeavor, but rather to involve staff at various levels in engaging with the assessment process and, ultimately, to help them understand what to do with the assessment data. This is consistent with Wise and Aaron's (2015) assertion that staff at all levels of a division of student affairs should have the ability to contribute to assessment. As a director, Sam also spoke to the importance of involving his staff with the assessment project:

> So I thought, “This cannot be the director’s assessment project, it has to be the department’s.” Everybody that kind of works – not that everybody will be 100% enthusiastic – but to really choose from possibilities, to have discussions and team meetings and retreats like, “Where are we at? What's going on with campus climate? Or, what's happening with college mental health?”

Sam argues that this approach was intentional in order to engage the larger department in conversations around assessment and be strategic, looking over multiple years to determine what needed to be assessed. This approach, Sam says, is how the topic of outreach programming, which had energy and interest from the staff, came to be the focus of the assessment project Dana led. Each of the facilitators specifically referred to colleagues within their department with whom they would regularly discuss the project, bounce ideas, refine the plan, and discuss progress. Not one of the facilitators described their experience as a solitary one. Additionally, each of the directors interviewed shared that while they were not overly involved in the assessment project itself, they did check in regularly with the assessment facilitator about the project, discussed ideas, and provided a space for staff members to talk about the assessment project. Having this type of support within one’s department helps elevate the importance of the assessment project and allows for multiple conversations amongst colleagues at various stages of the assessment process.

Leo, the Assessment Champion. One of the organizational aspects that is working in ASU’s favor to help facilitate the practice of data use is having an assessment champion in student affairs whom the participants clearly trust and rely on to support them with their respective projects. While Olivia should be credited for creating the process and getting the assessment initiative off the ground and letting it blossom within student affairs, Leo is truly seen as an advocate and great resource for each of the departments and the assessment facilitators. He seems to play an important role for each of the facilitators. Whether by being a resource and providing clear templates and timelines, which assisted both Dana and Elena, or meeting regularly with Carmen to discuss the project and aid in analysis, Leo is seen as critical to the success of these projects and this makes the facilitators feel supported.

It is clear from my conversations that Leo helps drive the process and provides ongoing support and guidance in his role. As Emily shared, “What I see is, I think Leo gets very involved with this and really cares about it and gets excited about it and then you catch that, you know?” Each of the assessment facilitators specifically cited Leo as serving as a resource to them. Dana said, “…Honestly, the biggest help was Leo. Any time I had a sort of research question, like, ‘Hey, I'm thinking about doing this versus this, what do you…?’ I mean, I kind of just went to him.” She noted that when she had questions or needed to run some analysis, she looked to Leo for guidance. Elena expressed a similar thought, saying, “Leo was key in supporting us in the formation of the project.” Elena also credited Leo for helping to make the project successful:

> I also would have meetings, one-on-one meetings with Leo, which were extremely helpful and I think were crucial to what I thought was the most difficult part, which was shaping the project. I definitely felt initially very overwhelmed by having to kind of create this project and I felt that those one-on-ones, where I could sort of brainstorm or share ideas with Leo, were really helpful and he would sort of provide support. I truly believe that I could not have done this without the support that I did have, so I do think that that was crucial, especially having someone like Leo who was focused specifically on sort of supporting these different assessment projects. Yeah, I don’t think that it would have been what it was if it had not been for that sort of resource.

Both Carmen and Joe also said that the amount of time that Leo spent, particularly with their department’s project, was significant in comparison to what they knew of his work with others. Joe indicated that Leo helped keep the project moving forward whenever he was involved. An additional way that Leo serves as an advocate and resource to the staff is by holding monthly facilitator meetings throughout the course of the assessment process. These meetings serve as spaces to check in, remind staff of milestones they should be hitting, and providing additional professional development on various aspects of assessment.

Leo himself also discussed the amount of time he spends thinking through the assessment templates and supporting the assessment facilitators, particularly during the assessment project-planning phase. He tries to make this process as accessible and clear as possible while helping the assessment facilitators really refine both their assessment question and scope of the project. Leo shared that he has established a certain level of trust with the staff, and so they feel comfortable being open and honest about how they feel and how they view the Division in relation to assessment. Leo said,

> I find myself, then, in this weird role where I'm trying to, through the process, push the division in a positive direction around assessment, around assessment usage, but that's very much through these relationships.

The role that Leo plays in the Divisional assessment process, and the level to which he supports and guides the staff who are engaging in assessment, helps to elevate, refine, and provide a clear path to facilitating such projects, whether for staff new to assessment, like Elena, or staff like Carmen, who are more experienced with assessment and who designed a larger study. While different models exist of how an assessment initiative might be structured within various divisions of student affairs, a central component of any assessment initiative is having an identifiable champion for assessment. At ASU, that person is Leo.

Process as a double-edged sword for assessment. In talking with the study's participants and in reviewing the documents, I discovered that process can be viewed as both a positive organizational element that has aided in guiding assessment toward use, and as a deterrent since the process drives the approach, often leaving little flexibility for the scope or timing of a desired assessment focus. When the process is viewed as steps that are broken down into more manageable pieces by the assessment staff, it is a positive element. Elena and Dana each expressed how the process, particularly templates, were beneficial both in shaping their understanding of what was expected, and also giving them a framework to make the project more manageable. Participants were asked which part of the process seemed to be the most emphasized, or where most of the time was spent over the course of the project. Notably, data use was not mentioned. Instead, project planning, methodology, the cycle of assessment, and timelines were cited the most. In terms of process, much more time seemed to be spent on the front end of assessment, and not as much when it came to how to approach what was learned through the process or how to apply the findings. Leo admitted that he spends a good amount of time during the proposal phase of the assessment process in various conversations with the facilitators regarding congruence between desired claims and methodology.

But not all staff view process as a supportive mechanism for data use. Joe expressed some frustration, saying,

> So much of – and I think sometimes my frustration with it is that we are so focused on making sure that there is this consistent process for every project that we spend little – we spend less time on implementing the project and then considering how we apply the learning that we gain from it. We sometimes get hung up on the process and following all the steps and we lose sight of the latter half. And sometimes, we just kind of mail in the last half of the project.

Joe's comment about "mailing in" the last half of the project might have some relationship to Leo's belief that he spends much of his time working with assessment facilitators on the front end of the project. Joe discussed one of the broader limitations to the process:

> I think the challenge is, we have a challenge in decision making to take action within the division sometimes. And I think that there is a discussion about finding projects that cross departments and that are collaborative that would encourage changes that affect more than one student population or one program within one department. But we have struggled to find ways to do that, and some of it has been structural, some of it has been about timelines and processes that are rigid and lack a reward system for doing something that is beyond a really small scope that we feel like we have control. So I think, often folks make decisions on what projects they're going to do based on how bureaucratic it may be to implement and use the results.

This comment also relates to a later section on *use* at various levels of the organization and how a broader, cross-department project could provide for greater *use* at the divisional level than a unit-based program level learning outcomes assessment. Carmen and Olivia both acknowledged a gap in the process when it comes to actual assessment data use. For example, Carmen shared, "…the process itself, the way it's set up, right, like it – you're required, at least in writing, to talk about how you'll use the data. It's not like there's an accountability piece though, right, nobody comes and checks to see if we've done what we said we were going to do." Olivia expressed a similar thought about follow up and accountability, saying, "but again there is nothing after the symposium that you back and say, 'Okay, now it is December, and it is six months after your project report was submitted. Have you achieved what you did?'" When it comes to process itself, Carmen had this to say,

> I think at ASU, we like to have processes, so I don't see us getting away from that. But I think the annual thing, just in talking to my colleagues, is something that makes them so disgruntled about the process that it - unfortunately I think overshadows any interest they have in actually assessing something.

Another staff member went so far to say that the annual process feels more like a lack of trust and checking assessment off so the division can say they are doing assessment.

From an administrative standpoint, and to understand the role of assessment staff, process is necessary to help a collective group of staff members navigate the process of conducting the assessment. ASU's assessment initiative would likely not be as far along if detailed processes were not in place. On the other hand, there is a tendency to fall down the rabbit hole of process and focus more on the steps, rather than on the actual project, its goal, and on finding value from the project.

Student Affairs Assessment Symposium. As part of the annual assessment project process, the Division hosted a Student Affairs Assessment Symposium for five years prior to the time of this study. The symposium was open to divisional staff members, campus partners at ASU and, recently, invited area institutions. Attendees of the symposium informally engage in conversations with the facilitators as they walk around viewing the posters. According to Leo, the purpose of the symposium is "to celebrate the work and also highlight some of the better projects in order to positively reinforce the sort of practices and utilization of assessment that we're looking to cultivate in order to help grow a culture of assessment at the institution."

Emily shared her perspective on the symposium, particularly noting a sense of pride and ownership that the assessment facilitators feel from her perspective:

> I think Leo does an incredible job of really integrating it and it gives the people involved, especially younger professionals, this sense of ownership. But actually being professionals, you know, standing there with a poster and watching them grow through that. So it's exciting.

Olivia discussed one of the benefits of this symposium and the perspective that is brought by having people outside of the division ask questions and learn about the projects:

> I think what's been a benefit now, too, is we have staff from other institutions who may not even know what this particular program is. They're learning about it for the first time

> and that inspires other questions that maybe are not relevant at certain points because they didn't get the whole picture. But at other times, they're going to ask questions that only they could ask because they're not even affiliated with All Saints and they're looking at it from a different perspective.

Olivia went on to note that, between the timing of the symposium occurring a few months after submitting their assessment project report, and the intentional inclusion of an action plan within the poster template, the public nature of the event encourages the articulation of *use*. She says,

> The symposium happens in October and their project is finished – they submitted their projects in July, and so now they have to talk about it. And they have had time to actually do something, so even if they haven't fully implemented it, it is still very much on the forefront of their mind and now they are having to talk about it. That sets a new level of expectation. And allowing them to talk, you know, not just to put it down on paper but have to actually talk about what they learned and what they're going to do and put it out there and really articulate how that's going to work because people will challenge – I mean not in a bad way, but they're challenging them and asking them questions.

A byproduct of the symposium that is tangentially related to the project itself are the conversations about the department and its programs, as well as opportunities to collaborate or follow up on a particular program. Dana voiced this sentiment from her experience, saying,

> I went to the assessment fair symposium, where you know we have the poster presentations and people from the community are invited. That was something I enjoyed a lot because most people came up and talked to me, not about what I had learned from my outreach, but in general, how [the department] does outreach and how it's thought about in our office and how we collaborate with other offices and what sort of presentations we do.

Joe echoed what Dana had to say about the symposium, noting,

> It serves a purpose for folks outside of the division to come and to see what we're doing and to draw connections between the work of the division and their own departments. But I think there are moments, at least, for folks to get really excited about something they're hearing and then feel like they potentially could connect with a colleague that they had not connected with in the past.

What I believe both Dana and Joe are describing would fit with what Jonson et al. (2015) considers as a new or enhanced community of practice that can be a result of assessment influence. When thinking about the practice of data use, an event such as the Assessment Symposium adds another contextual layer to show how staff engage with one another as they talk about their assessment projects, ask questions, challenge, and make connections. This event enables the conversation around an assessment project to move beyond the facilitator and their fellow staff members within their department. It brings fresh perspective from others engaging with their project. While I did ask the facilitators if any new insights came from the Symposium that may have resulted in changing their action plan or the like, neither Carmen, Dana, nor Elena could identify any examples of that being the case. If anything, the other participants in the symposium might have gained conceptual use in the process of viewing the posters and engaging in conversations with the facilitators. I think this event could be considered a best practice for other institutions to consider when improving upon their assessment processes.

Ribbons are not rewards. As part of the Assessment Symposium, projects are highlighted as best practice and receive public recognition at the event. Leo shared,

> That's why we have a specific award for plan of action, to say we want this to be an area that we reward. So of the rewards, right, we have plan of action, we have a methodology one – and then for the quality of findings. And so those are all very intentional because those are definitely areas - if you think about methodology and findings - that speaks to congruence. And then plan of action is this other piece.

Olivia also argued that while there is recognition surrounding the projects, it centers on elements of the project, including the action plan. She also acknowledged the ribbons are more about celebration than rewards. Given the timing of when the awards are made, these awards are really about intended data use or reported data use, not actually about how they have used the data.

Christakis and Bureau (2015) suggest that building rewards into the infrastructure of assessment helps to recognize good assessment and gain buy-in from staff. Sam noted that the assessment committee tries to build in rewards and that public recognition from colleagues and from the Vice President is important. However, he argues, this specific reward is not built into data use. Like Henning and Roberts (2015) who acknowledge the lack of rewards that are often missing when staff engage with assessment. Rosemary also contends that more could be done to reward those engaging with good assessment and data use, but from her perspective some of the reward is more intrinsic:

> In some ways, the rewards have been more inherent. I have seen, whether it's the individuals and/or the departments, that who put the most thought into this gain those kind of intrinsic rewards; that it isn't just seen as a task, that it is part of the work that they're doing, and you do it well. The ones that are just seeing this as a task, a check box, aren't getting that kind of recognition.

While the departments included in this case study did receive public recognition at the Assessment Symposium through best practice ribbons awarded for various elements of the assessment project, there were mixed thoughts as to whether there were actual rewards in place that lead to greater assessment-data use in the Division. Emily shared that she felt the recognition was nice for Elena, but as a young professional, she said, "I don't feel there is a ton of affirmation beyond just, okay, that was good work, now next year what are we doing, you know?" Carmen, however, thought the awards might be a potential driver for some staff:

> There's an award for - I think action plan was one of the ones we got, and so that kind of public recognition, I guess, ups the ante a little bit around how are you using it. And if you're using it and using it well, you're going to be recognized in front of your peers, people from outside the institution, so I think that kind of drives the use piece.

But she also indicated that, while awards might matter to individuals, from her experience, departments do not benefit:

> I don’t feel like our department has been elevated in some way because of the way that we used the data or because we got some ribbons. I think some people are so bothered by the process that they are like, “I don’t want to do the process and even – if you put a ribbon on there, it doesn’t matter to me. I just don’t want to do this. You're making me do it. I don’t want to do it.”

Joe similarly voiced a strong opinion about the lack of rewards and ambivalence:

> I don’t think that there's a strong reward system for it. There's a lack of accountability for folks who don’t turn in a project. And if your project is outstanding versus mediocre, there's very little recognition of the difference. There are nice things, like best practice ribbons, that are placed on posters but beyond that there's very little reward for doing exceptional work in assessment in the division.

This frustration combines both the need for a stronger reward structure and a level of accountability that demonstrates good work is valued, compared to just completing a task for the sake of a deadline or requirement. When in it comes to rewards in the form of public recognition, I believe that Joe is speaking of recognition that should come from divisional leadership by not only holding departments accountable when they fail to conduct high quality assessment, but also through reference to and connection with conversations and decisions that may be made regarding what was learned through the assessment projects. Christakis and Bureau (2015) echo the need for balance between recognizing good assessment work while also having mechanisms in place to address those departments with low quality projects. It appeared to some participants that there is no incentive for doing solid assessment work as compared to merely going through the motions. Schuh et, al. (2015) suggested connecting resources as a reward structure for good assessment in the form of providing a funding source for initiating projects and providing permanent funds to continue good assessment work.

Rewards for conducting good assessment are an important part of creating a strong culture (Christakis & Bureau, 2015). ASU incorporating public recognition at the annual symposium is commendable, but it does not appear that ribbons are the type of reward or motivator that staff desire. Structurally, rewards might not be the organizational element that makes the difference between some or no assessment data use.

From an organizational perspective, elements such as people, opportunities for interaction, and having an assessment champion in place help to facilitate assessment data use. While there was no direct evidence that these elements lead to *use*, they do contribute to a culture of enabling the practice of data use. Alternatively, the structure and process of assessment both serve as helpful tools but are also a limiting factor in keeping broader, sometimes more meaningful assessments from being conducted. Lastly, while low-level rewards are in place to recognize work well done, the rewards do not incentivize staff in the way they desire. Reward might come more from seeing that their work and the assessment project not only impacts their particular program, but also from seeing that the leadership within the division connect the assessments back to larger divisional conversations, issues, and rationale for decisions.

Use at different levels of the organization

One of the areas explored in this study was if and how the practice of assessment data use may look different depending on what level of the organization is the reference point for assessment data use. Given the distribution of the study's participants, which ranged from staff members who directly led an assessment project within a given department, all the way up to senior divisional leadership, exploring data use from the perspective of these vantage points was critical. To serve as a guiding framework for this level of organizational analysis, I looked to

Henry and Mark's (2003) mechanisms of evaluation influence on both attitudes and behavior. Within each level, Henry and Mark (2003) describe multiple mechanisms or example outcomes of influence. For the purposes of this study, I explore *use* from three perspectives: (1) individual, which I frame from the perspective of the assessment facilitator; (2) interpersonal, which is situated at the departmental level mainly through the lens of the department director in relation to his or her staff members; and (3) collective, which represents the division of student affairs and data use at the divisional leadership level.

When discussing use, some participants did note their perception that assessment use is different, and should be different, depending on the level of the organization. Rosemary argued that there is value to this differentiation depending on the level of the organization, saying, "You wouldn't want every single one of those levels all doing and thinking within the same components of assessment or the process. The value is having those kinds of multiple layers to not only improve what you're doing internally, but also externally."

Dana further described how the lens applied when it comes to assessment data use shifts depending on the role of the staff member. She suggested that whereas the staff most connected to the program or activity being assessed use the data to directly inform their work, a director brings a "dual lens" that includes not only informing their work, but also what Dana described as an "administrative lens" which compels them to advocate for the department to divisional leadership who might use the data on a macro level where their focus is on retention. Similarly, Emily shared her thought on how assessment data use looks differently at different levels:

> But that's how I see it, I think, each of those levels using the data differently. She (Elena) used it to change the way she did her day-to-day job and design the program that she was charged to oversee. As a director, I use it, then, to bridge her work with the others in my

> department. And then as an AVP, I would see that bridge between the departments that someone oversees and connect the three projects.

Leo also argued that the assessment projects are more than just about the department's specific workshops or programs being assessed, but also about what a division can learn when looking across departments:

> I think that's at the micro level, but then broadly speaking, it's not just around individual intervention design, but also can be really important to help institutions think about how we learn from the different ways that we are cultivating student learning through student learning assessment to think about broader curricular changes, and not just individual workshops or programs, but about what does that mean for an institution's ability or even a division of student affairs' ability to learn across one another or across the departments, right? To develop better, smarter interventions that build on the data that we have as a whole.

Within these conversations, though, there was an acknowledgment that the specificity of the assessment projects by design might limit how far-reaching data use goes within the organization and that senior level leadership might not derive as much, or be able to make broader connections from the projects aside from that of accountability.

The next sections will focus more specifically on what the participants had to say about data use at each level of the organization.

Individual: Assessment Project Facilitator. Assessment project facilitators described behavioral influences at the individual level that resulted in instrumental and process use, while observations from directors and senior leadership provided evidence of attitudinal influence in the form of personal transformation. Data use at the individual level also likely occurs for the assessment project facilitators at ASU because they typically have direct oversight over both the assessment project and the program that is being assessed. As discussed earlier, for the theme Beyond Instrumental Use, the study's participants articulated different forms of *use*. Using

Henry & Mark's (2003) framework as an overlay to those findings, we see that out of the six specific mechanisms of influence that the authors include at the individual level, three mechanisms can be associated with the facilitators with regards to *use*: behavior change, skill acquisition, and attitude change.

The behavioral mechanism is essentially instrumental use. Both Carmen and Elena discussed instrumental change that came from conducting their respective assessments. Carmen cited specific curricular changes that were made to the program. She also cited six curricular changes that occurred through conducting the assessment on the first-year experience program. As mentioned previously, these changes included removing content the students already demonstrated knowing through the pre-assessment, incorporating active learning strategies and reflection, and prioritizing content most pertinent to first semester experiences. Elena provided examples of making program modifications post assessment that included weekly reflections and a specific session at the fall retreat to address and spend more time on concepts that the students scored lowest on in the assessment. Dana described how, through the assessment, it was recommended the outreach presentation be revised to incorporate more practical skills-based use of self-care. Additionally, one of the changes that occurred through the assessment Dana led was implementing new data collection mechanisms.

While process use encapsulates what is learned about assessment through the process of conducting an assessment itself, one mechanism of use that Mark and Henry (2004) lay out is specifically about skills learned as a result of conducting the assessment. All three facilitators spoke about skill development as a result of serving as their individual department's assessment facilitator. Elena talked about how she gained confidence in her skills because of conducting the assessment. Leo mentioned that he learned how to do a McNemar's test through his work with Carmen. Carmen herself talked about how her skills around assessment have improved and about the benefit of having this experience and skills she can speak to down the road in her career.

Lastly and less directly as compared to the other individual level mechanisms Henry and Mark (2003) outline, is the attitude change mechanism which was, for the most part, not articulated directly from the individual assessment facilitators themselves, but from a recognition of this attitude change from the vantage point of their director. Emily talked how she witnessed a shift in Elena, a personal transformation in terms confidence and ownership over her program that came through conducting this assessment. She said she observed this change from previous staff that have facilitated the department projects as well. Rosemary and Joe both talked about a shift in confidence as a result of conducting the assessment project that they have seen in staff like Carmen. Dana spoke about this shift in her own attitude toward the assessment project saying that she got more out of the project than she originally thought.

Interpersonal: Departmental. Data use at the interpersonal and collective level, as laid out by Henry and Mark (2003), is in line with the practice of data use that Coburn and Turner (2012) argue centers on interaction between people and the data. Using Henry and Mark's (2003) framework at the interpersonal level, from the vantage point of the department's use of the data, two of their five mechanisms appeared most salient in conversations with participants: justification and persuasion.

The program that was the focus of Carmen and Joe's assessment intersects with a large number of faculty and staff who facilitate their first-year program. They mentioned that use of data aided in justifying their decision-making with their advisory group around changes with the program. Having data to support a decision that they wanted to make helps achieve the buy-in necessary. Likewise, Emily spoke of being able to leverage the community service assessment as persuasion or political use to help explain the value of the programs they lead.

Elena described how in working with Emily, her director, *use* became more of a departmental effort:

> And then Emily also, you know, as we were thinking about the action plan and – we definitely discussed as a team sort of our findings. So the plan of action was something that was a little bit more connected with the office as a whole of like, okay, this is kind of what we learned. Outside of maybe what I would want to do, what does this mean for maybe our whole office.

Joe provided an example of the interpersonal nature of assessment data use. Although it did not directly involve him as a director, he described the relationship between Carmen, the assessment facilitator, a department intern, and Leo, the Divisional Assessment Coordinator:

> It was more between the two of them [Carmen and intern], yeah, and she would report out – and Leo as well as the assessment coordinator, so the three of them often would sit and make sense of the data. And Leo would provide the support for the intern in knowing how to run some of the statistics. And then Carmen would be able to apply that to kind of some of the work that she oversaw as part of the project lead.

Collective: Divisional. As far as assessment data use at the divisional level, while it is more challenging to pinpoint when and how it occurs, the participants did express a desire for application of greater divisional assessment data use. It is actually thinking about assessment data use at this level, along with outside pressure, that has led ASU to press pause on their annual assessment projects and consider a different approach. Olivia described some of this challenge, saying,

> And I think that another question that we are grappling with right now is not only, "How are the departments using that data?" but, "How is the information that is collected through the departments then able to inform divisional decisions?" We are looking ahead

> at, you know, what do we need to do to refine how our outcomes are set up, our departmental and our divisional outcomes, and how might we assess program level outcomes but add questions related to divisional level outcomes? Because, again, some of the feedback from the Higher Learning Commission, and somewhat of a change in the assessment world, is the idea that outcomes should be measurable at all levels, which hurts my brain.

She went on to say, “As far as, say, taking three departments who did projects related to leadership, socially responsible leadership, and saying we actually did something at the divisional level, as a result of these results - we haven’t done.” Rosemary also agreed with this sentiment, saying, “The number two challenge is we're not connecting the dots. So we will have twelve disparate projects working with small groups of students and not really saying anything.” She additionally shared that when it came to these assessment projects and selecting topics, the division is not thinking about broad impact or needs in terms of strategic priorities or divisional goals and developing assessments that would contribute to those strategies. Alternatively to Rosemary’s perspective, it could be argued that the divisional learning domains and learning outcome statements do allow for broad impact if the assessment projects were chosen to help better understand student learning at the divisional level.

At the time of the study, ASU’s student affairs assessment projects centered on program- and activity-level learning outcomes of the departments. While linked to divisional learning domains, the projects were not designed to measure learning at the divisional level, but rather they were designed to be mapped to divisional learning domains. Olivia acknowledged that projects are more about informing where and how learning is occurring and less about actual decision making at the divisional level. She said, “This is more about our understanding of where we are contributing to divisional learning and the change isn't really happening at the divisional level, which is why, when I mentioned earlier kind of as we look ahead, we are looking at how we can assess divisionally."

Carmen voiced her understanding of the assessment projects and their original intent:

> …when it was designed, the cycle, I don't know that it was designed to assess things at a level where divisional decisions would be made around what's learned. It almost feels like it's like *ad hoc* assessment where you're just kind of like doing an assessment project because you're curious and you want to learn something about one piece of the work that you do. So I think that's why – like there is no minimum sample size, there is no – so you could assess a retreat that 30 students come to and that's acceptable or, you know, for us, we just happened in our area to oversee a program that impacts every single first-year student. And so that's just – that is something where I feel like Gene and Rosemary would want to know and could use it at their level, but I don't think the assessment cycle process here was designed necessarily to inform those decisions.

Leo spoke of this challenge as well in terms of assessing student learning at the activity or program level within a department and how it does not align with claims or evidence of divisional learning outcomes. He said, "Whether or not a department finds that students are able to articulate outcomes or articulate their experiences in say, mock interviews, I can't use that [information] to make any divisional claims because it's not the right data to make those. I think about congruence between claims and data. I can't do that using the data there." He reiterated what Olivia had shared about the feedback from the Higher Learning Commission which said to ASU that program level data on student learning cannot be used for university-level claims about student learning.

When asking the participants about how they have seen the division collectively use data from these projects, the reaction was not overly positive but can be an area of opportunity moving forward. Leo, Joe, and Carmen all indicated that they did not think divisional leadership have found much *use* from the assessment projects. It should be noted that their responses were all framed in terms of decision-making or instrumental use. Leo shared that in his role, he cannot say that staff trust the division (meaning divisional leadership) to have used data to make decisions. Carmen also echoed this notion as the Division recently went through some reorganization that left staff unsettled. She said,

> But, I mean definitely, like in the last year with decisions that have been made, that question has come up, like how did you use information data? Whether it was from the assessment projects or it was from our key activity maps, what data were used to make decisions? I feel like it just isn't talked about or perceived in that way where we have to assess things so that Rosemary and our VP can kind of speak to it or make decisions around it.

While I am not sure if the organizational decisions about which Carmen specifically spoke could have benefited from having student learning outcomes assessment data, some of the participants, when thinking about data use, connected it to that particular organizational issue. Leo, from his own perspective, said "I really don't like sounding negative, I don't know that I would feel confident saying that they do, or have found value in the projects." But as the assessment coordinator for the division, he also shared that he has not found *use* from the assessment projects because the assessed experiences are often so narrow and involve so few students that what comes from the assessments is not broad enough to truly inform the division. Some question whether leadership even finds *use* through the assessment projects. As Joe puts it,

> I would say that I have had very few conversations that involved data with leadership. There's very little feedback that comes back from these projects from leadership. There's little recognition of the learning that comes out of these projects and how it could be shared more broadly outside of an individual department or a project.

He went on to say, "So I don't see or – and maybe it does inform decisions, but we are not explicitly connecting decisions to new learning that comes out of our assessment – the assessment work that we do in our division. So that's an area of real struggle for us." However, Joe suggests that where his department's assessment projects have actually gotten greater *use* has been from outside of the division with his department's campus partners. There is a perceived missed opportunity at this level of data use that is being articulated not only by the regional accrediting body, but also by members of the division itself. Joe says,

> So I think that's a huge area of growth. We talk about wanting to use data a lot, but we don't model that practice in our leadership team meetings, in the reports that we write outside of this assessment project, and I think this speaks to, as well, when projects are based in a department or narrowly around a program within a department, there has to be a real desire by leadership to read all of these, explore the commonalities, find connections, share results, and I have not seen that over the last – over the time that I've been here.

It is clear that staff expressed frustrations and recognized that the current design of the assessment project structure may have limitations on divisional use. I believe the way in which the staff were thinking about divisional use, though, was from more of an instrumental, decision-making point of view. None of Henry and Mark's (2003) collective mechanisms of influence at this level were exhibited through my discussions with the participants. This might be due to the fact that a number of the participants shared that the assessment projects are often too narrow, have a low sample size, and are not interconnected with other department projects so the *use* or influence of the assessment project does not rise to the level of collective influence.

According to the participants, assessment data use should look different at each level of the organization. What may be instrumental or process use at the individual level from the perspective of the assessment facilitator, might look like conceptual or symbolic use at the interpersonal (departmental) and collective (Division) levels. A challenge becomes the specificity of the project, the size of the population assessed, and the rigor; all of these can affect the possibility of data use at higher levels of the organization. There was a call for divisional leadership to connect the assessment data to decision making. While this might not always be possible or applicable, there is a desire from the staff to see that Divisional leadership find value in the assessment projects and that they have influence on Divisional issues.

The Impact of Time

A central element within Kirkhart's (2000) theory of influence framework is the dimension of time and its relationship to data use. In talking to the study's participants, time emerged both as a frustration and a limiting factor in terms of not only selecting assessment project topics, but also finding more significant data use through the assessment projects based on the frequency of the cycle. Olivia, the Assistant VP, recognized that time can be an issue for many:

> …because I think one of the challenges for us, and likely for others, is you finish an assessment cycle and you are starting another one, and so how to continue to really look back over the past year and stay on top of the projects that were just finished to make sure the changes were implemented, and then perhaps asking additional questions about how successful that was in implementing those changes.

This theme explores a number of factors that contribute to the relationship between data use and time, which include the investment in time and effort made by those leading an assessment project and that time drives the assessment process. The timing of the assessment project cycle poses challenges, as does the frequency of the projects, which can strain departments. Lastly within this theme of time I will also explore the question of when assessment data use occurs within the assessment process.

Amount of time and effort. When considering the relationship between data use and time, it is not only a structural issue about the timing and connection between process and timelines, but also the actual investment of time staff members make outside of regular day-today work conducting these assessment projects. Joe emphasized, “We just shouldn’t underestimate how much time and intention needs to go into this kind of work.” Both Elena and Carmen also commented on the time commitment. Elena talked about all of the extra hours at work needed to focus on the assessment and the realization that there was only so much time to complete her interviews and the entire project, and doing all this while still staying on top of her other job responsibilities. Carmen, who led projects on the same program over the course of two assessment cycles, talked about the need for prioritization and adjusting responsibilities:

> It changed year by year, how much time I was spending on this, but for me it was so critical. I had to prioritize spending time on this over other things because of the anticipation of making some big changes. So I had to delegate things differently, and hiring an intern was part of that Leo and Olivia being willing to spend more of their time with our department than maybe other departments just based on, like, us really needing some help to do this well. So yeah, I think for us, with this project in particular, it took up a significant portion of time and we had to make sacrifices in other areas. We were able to kind of change up responsibilities and move things around to different people’s plates to make the time, so that was helpful to us, whereas I can see in other areas you may not be able to ask the assistant director to take on more of a role in training so that you can spend more time looking at assessment, working with assessment, etc.

Having staff that saw value in this project and a supervisor who allowed responsibilities to be shifted enabled Carmen to carve out the time, which likely made this project more successful. Carmen also noted the amount of time and ongoing support that both Leo and Olivia provided to Carmen as she worked on this assessment project.

Time Drives Process. A common phrase when explaining assessment in student affairs is that assessment is a process. However, in talking with the staff, it appears that the focus on process might dictate the amount of time that is allotted for staff to conduct their assessment. Rosemary captured the frustration and true driver of the projects well:

> In order to be uniform across the division, we've kind of imposed, “This is what your timeframe is.” But departments – their rhythm of the year might look very different. So I sometimes think we impose a time commitment that is difficult for the department to meet, then it becomes kind of this task. I would love to start much more broadly and talking with my departments to say, “Alright, let’s just envision this and then when…” Many times, the time drives the project as opposed to the project driving the time. So there's those kind of time constraints and expectations.

It is also apparent how much time drives the process associated with the assessment projects. In looking at the assessment project plan templates and assessment project report templates, timelines are an important element. Time-associated prompts in the assessment planning template include: “By what month you need to make decisions based on the results of your project in order to influence changes for the next iteration of your program,” and “Detailed timeline in order to meet your project deadline.” During the monthly meetings, assessment facilitators are asked to fill out assessment project plan progress reports in which each assessment facilitator provides the current status of their project with statuses that include: Not Yet Started; In-Progress; Finished; Relative Progress; Behind Schedule; As Planned; and Ahead of Schedule. When asked about those meetings, Elena shared:

> …I didn’t think that there was, like, one particular thing that was focused on the most. But I just remember the way we would start every meeting was on the timeline and just making sure that people were on the timeline. And I think that’s just because of the nature of - there's a million things going on and this is something that can easily be kind of put on the backburner.

While administratively, such time-based questions help to hold facilitators accountable and ensure that projects stay on track and get completed, it inserts a certain amount of pressure that forced the project to follow a prescribed timeline. Elena also described that, while the facilitators were “pushed to start their projects early as possible,” if it seemed a project might have gotten off track, a discussion would ensue reminding the facilitator that the project must get done before the end of the academic year. As part of the assessment report template, one of the prompts was, "A timeline by when the above steps will take place as part of implementation." So even after the project is complete, implementation of the data use needs a timeline as well. Leo recognizes how it can feel like a time crunch for staff:

> Well, one thing that some folks have said to me straight up is that the timeline of the data assessment – of the assessment project - is a year and change, right? So we start brainstorming. I try to push it earlier every year, but essentially it's July to July. So by the time many folks actually collect data, it's winter at best. Sometimes they're collecting data in the spring. So then they're collecting, analyzing, interpreting, and then planning next steps in maybe a month and a half. So I think part of it is the timeline, sometimes for some folks, crunches it that at some, point they're just trying to get it done so they haven't had what they would argue to be the time necessary to really think on it. And in some cases, maybe have a more participatory process to discuss it in order to cultivate those next steps.

This begs the question, "Does the project process instill the need to find a topic that can manageably be assessed within the time period to ensure completion, but not have enough time to focus on *use*?" Not only does the timeframe of the assessment project affect *use*, but also so does the timing of the cycle.

Timing of Cycle. While the annual reporting timeframe for student affairs at ASU is based on the fiscal year July 1 to June 30, operationally the assessment projects, which begin with the planning period and ending with writing reports, have a timeframe closer to October through the end of June. For some departments, the timing of the programs and services that staff may have a desire to assess do not necessarily fit well into the timeframe of the assessment projects, which primarily places planning in the fall and data collection in the winter and/or spring. In talking with the participants, a few said that this was a challenge and a consideration as they choose what to assess each year. Leo recognized that the process itself, and the imposed timeline for the annual assessment projects, inherently places a barrier and limitations on which programs and services might be most easily assessed depending on what part of the year they are typically offered. While the process does not preclude the assessment of a summer or fall program, Leo hypothesized: “Let’s say we figured out a way to make it work, but then the next year, another cycle is going to start. So then they're off cycle with a project over the summer. But then it just gets too messy.” Dana also expressed this challenge: “…Because you basically have to be gathering data within, like, this three-month time range and everyone is gathering data at the same – so unfortunately if you're assessing something that doesn’t occur during that time frame, well, you can't assess that for that year.” Olivia also reflected on the issue of timing in the assessment cycle and the impact on the way department’s approach the project:

> So one of the benefits and challenges to our cycle is that staff member can very much see it as a cycle, so submitting your report on July 1, but they may have actually facilitated the program in the fall. And if that’s the case, I mean we need to work on – and we've had a few departments that have started to do this more, but when you complete the project, you finish your report so that you can get your results and you can then use those results to make change for the following year. So if this is a fall program and I don’t do all my analysis and kind of come up with my final action plan or results until July, I may or may not be able to implement those in time for early September depending on who is involved with those changes. You know, if it’s a larger program and there's communications that go out, so there's a variety of things. So I think the timing is really important.

Summer programs, such as orientation, fall into this category of being off-cycle. Joe whose unit oversees first year programs, said,

> Our busy season and our planning season is a little off-kilter from the rest of the division of student affairs, so when we follow the project timeline, we potentially won't be analyzing results and making suggestions for change until spring, which is too far gone for us to make changes to our summer orientation programs, or sometimes for our fall programs, which means the use of that data may be a year delayed as well.

Related to Joe's comment, Carmen explained how they approached their department's particular assessment project, saying, "The timing of our program and the timing of the assessment cycle are different, so we were kind of writing or thinking in the past tense at the point of writing the report because the curriculum had already been rolled out and we trained folks on it and it was kind of in the works." It should be noted that their department did a project over a two-year period.

Thus, while a particular program's learning outcomes may be important to assess, depending on when the program takes place during the year in relation to the annual assessment cycle, the learning outcomes may not be assessed if the program does not match up with the assessment cycle timeline. Given the annual cycle and project planning happening in the fall, with reports due in July, programs that may take place during the summer, or even early fall semester, won't be assessed. Along with timing of the cycle and its potential impact on which programs are assessed through the projects, another element of time that was noted is the frequency of the projects. Should units be required to complete a student learning outcomes assessment project annually or is the annual nature of the projects also a barrier to assessment data use?

Annual Cycle. When discussing the annual cycle of leading assessment projects, participants felt it was almost like being in a constant state of assessment. While one cycle of assessment is ending, the next cycle is already beginning. Four of the participants described the assessment cycle vividly, using phrases such as "waves crashing," "a rat race," "a roller coaster," and "a revolving door" when talking about the annual cycle of assessment projects. From their perspectives, the assessment cycle does not allow for adequate reflection and engagement, thus impacts the practice of data use. For example, Carmen shared,

> I think people feel like there's no time to take what you learned and put it into action, like that action plan area or section. It just feels like waves crashing, like you just can't get back up before the next assessment plan is like rolling out. I mean, you do have to submit your proposal before you've completed – like they overlap.

Very similarly, Joe articulated,

> It feels like a constant – it feels a bit like a rat race, that you're racing to finish one report and that immediately you're thinking about what the next report is in the middle of managing your programs and services that you may oversee as well. Which leads to lack of critical thought about what is actually necessary or not a significant amount of time to even reflect on the learning from this year's project to allow that to influence or inform the next year's project as well.

Emily also shared that it feels like *use* gets lost in the process. She explains, "Well and I think the timing is one piece of it and it does feel like a revolving door instead of like, 'Wow, let's sit with this and do something with it.' That gets lost, that absolutely gets lost."

Joe similarly believes that time is not being allowed for interpretation and implementation:

> So I think if we're going to spend this amount of time, and we're going to put this amount of resource into understanding what students are learning or experiencing, depending I guess if it's on student learning in the future, then we shouldn't assume that we just know how to use the results, right? Just because we have some new knowledge that we understand how to implement that. But sometimes, we don't spend a lot of time there because we're ready to move on to the next project that needs to start, right?

Joe captures some of the complexities with assessment data use, wondering if staff know how to implement what has been learned through an assessment and if we allow enough time to focus on this important part of the assessment cycle.

Since the Division began including assessment projects as part of the annual reporting process, the expectation has been that each department conducts a new assessment project each year. The imagery that was described by the staff makes it sound as if there is no time to catch one's breath. Such a pace and focus on timelines and process can be detrimental to the culture that ASU is trying to create and the level of support that the Division has built over the years.

Assessment Facilitator Turn Over & Time. With the annual frequency also comes the need to determine who in the department will lead the assessment project as the primary facilitator. In most cases, the assessment facilitator changes from year to year. Emily noted this quandary, saying, "I also feel this whole thing about, 'Here we go again, we've got to come up – who's on?' You know? As opposed to, 'We have a need that we really want to know more about.' It's like, okay, we have to do something. You did it last time. Okay, you do it. I mean, that's really how it feels." So rather than spending the time to reflect and think about what is of most interest to assess, the first question winds up being, "Who is going to lead the project this year?" Joe expounded on this annual challenge of new assessment facilitators by saying, "The cycle, in theory, makes sense if assessment skill is strong in the division, right? Once a year could be feasible if we had a cadre of professionals who this felt very natural for them to engage this and that they could do it efficiently as part of their function."

But this is not always the case, so a large portion of the fall semester is spent on skill building and project planning because, for some staff members, it is the first time they are facilitating such a project. Elena reflected on her experience as a first-time assessment project facilitator, sharing, "I would say I felt pretty lost the first couple of months into the project and so that definitely reduced the amount of time that I had to get everything done." Joe provided more perspective on the relationship between the skill level of the assessment facilitators and offered this observation and alternative:

> I think it's one of two things: either it needs to be this group that can efficiently move through an assessment cycle, and that they're not always skill building some of the basic skills of initiating and completing an assessment project; or it needs to be spread out a bit, and maybe it's every other year or the cycle shifts from one year to the next and – you know there's a six-month break of allowing departments really to explore the new learning and use that then to formulate a research question that they want to explore in the next project.

Similarly, Joe shared the following about the facilitators:

> I think when, every year, we have someone new come in [to be the assessment facilitator] we have to start from scratch with them even understanding research design. And what might take someone with really strong skills in assessment a short period of time to accomplish, it takes someone who is new to this project, or this task, a significant amount of time, right? So where I see that affecting the use of data is that we don't always then – we don't always accomplish the projects in a timely fashion for it to be used immediately.

Joe is suggesting that if you are a new facilitator, the time it takes within an annual cycle to learn about assessment, as well as to plan and conduct an assessment, leaves little time to complete the project and focus on use. If the frequency was reevaluated, this could assist in providing more time for new facilitators to feel fully comfortable and have adequate time to do it all well.

Alternative Approaches to the Annual Cycle. Other participants described possible alternatives to an annual cycle or provided reasons why the frequency adds pressure. Sam shared his thoughts on the frequency, saying,

> I'm not sure about the frequency. You know, having one project a year is overwhelming. But it could be advisable to have one year where you're doing the project and then the next year you focus on implementation. You know more like reflection, discussion, like how do you operationalize it? So I find that there's not that much time for operational – you know we get done at the – usually we're writing this thing up and it's like halfway through the summer and then you're – we've got about six weeks and we're heavily planning for the next year and people are on vacation in the summer time. And so that can make it harder with – so already we're starting on the new project before we – there's not like a ton of time to like, "How do we let the data wash over us? How can we sift through it and make sense of it?" And I think that that puts more responsibility, like, on the director to say, you know, "What are you going to do with it? As opposed to having

> more of a team-oriented approach on this. So, I know that’s come up before, it’s been discussed like maybe we'll do three in a row and have one year off or every other year.

Both Elena and Carmen echoed Sam thoughts around an every-other year cycle or even greater flexibility for a two-year project. Carmen expressed that the process is rigid and doesn’t allow for longer-term projects. Similarly, Elena reflected that while some projects can be completed within a one-year cycle, if she could do her assessment project over again, she believes there would be benefit to working on the project over the course of two years. Rosemary also shared her thoughts around alternatives to the annual frequency of departmental projects, and also described a benefit of grouping departments to look at a larger divisional issue:

> In terms of the process is the – every department doing something every year I think has been a drain and a strain on departments and personnel and enthusiasm and commitment. So, the pressure to get something done as opposed to, “Could we think about this a little differently?” Could you say only four departments do something one year and then another four? Or you put multiple departments together and kind of look at you know one larger issue?

Olivia and Leo each discussed feedback from the Higher Learning Commission about the need to be assessing learning at the divisional level while also recommending an every-other year assessment project model to incorporate time for greater data use. Olivia explained, “And the second year – it doesn’t mean that we are not doing any assessment, but it’s focused more on the implementation piece than just moving forward and doing something else.” She reflected that there could be a benefit to such a switch, allowing more time to focus on data use. It should be noted that with this HLC recommendation, student affairs at ASU has taken a pause this year and are not conducting department assessment projects to allow for process and outcomes revisions. Carmen recognizes that going from a one-year to a two-year model will not be an automatic fix for data use, but she suggests that some other modifications need to be made to encourage greater use:

> I feel like the annual thing is just kind of arbitrary, just like picked. We're going to do yearly/annual and, you know, I think you have to start somewhere when you're creating a new process. So, like. annual is the start and now there's talk of, like, every other year and I still feel like that's just arbitrary. We're just letting people have a year off and that hopefully is so that they can implement things.

While extending the timeline can build in opportunities for more reflection and thus, theoretically, greater *use*, I argue that *use* needs to be broadened beyond programmatic changes. However, there seems to be a growing call for a revised timeframe and structure for how these assessment projects take place. Rosemary summed up that sentiment by saying, "You've got to read the tea leaves and see, okay, we need to reboot or refresh or reenergize around this." She expounded on what this might look like:

> The benefit of the time and the restriction on it is it gets done. So being so open-ended, you're never going to get any kind of results. So I understand that, but in thinking through – so our assessment process is now eleven, twelve years old. What a great time to just kind of take a timeout. What's worked? What hasn't? And then really think through – instead of being so department driven, could it be priority driven or need driven that we are seeing? I'd much rather have the conversation at that more theoretical level and then seeing, "Okay, what departments could contribute to that?" Or asking the departments, what issues do you think need to be looked at and addressed and assessed and then getting their feedback to envision that. So then, perhaps it is a two-year process. Perhaps it's a longitudinal process. Perhaps it's small kind of increments to get to a certain point. Perhaps it's multi departments really thinking through that. By having, you know, yearly departmental projects, we've gotten far with that, but I think it's reached kind of a shelf life and needs a rethinking about that. And I would much rather start at a more conceptual level to help drive what it really should look like.

Joe also shared his thoughts around what a new approach might look like for the division,

> I do think, though, we have divisional learning outcomes that we all seek to roll up to and that if we started thinking about assessing at a divisional level, that we could find some synergy across departments. But from the onset it would have to – you know rather then – we would have to group some individuals together from the onset, from the design and

> from the very intention setting of the project instead of assuming that we could get farther down the road, find some similarities in what we're talking about doing and then trying to group folks.

Use over time. Aside from time being a factor that poses a challenge and inhibits the practice of assessment data use, along with a possibility of narrowing the scope of the projects chosen, a question remains: "When does the practice of data use occur and what does it look like?" Kirkhart's model (2000) explores time from three reference points: immediate, end of cycle, and long term. I wanted to see if, through my conversations, I could identify the point at which staff engage in the practice of data use. The interviews were not as robust in this inquiry, but there are some take always.

In terms of immediate data use, or use that occurs while conducting the assessment, each of the project facilitators provided some examples of where this occurred. Dana described how she began to identify action steps while she was planning and conducting her assessment. The steps that were coming to mind as she was in the data collection phase had more to do with the gaps she was seeing in how the department was maintaining data associated with the outreach programming. While Dana was describing data use that was more immediate, it did not stem from the learning outcomes but rather from what was needed to effectively design the assessment. Elena described "aha" moments that were occurring while conducting the interviews. As she was listening to the students, she was already in the interpretation phase and thinking about how the staff talk about some of the concepts and the need for staff to make the concepts more easily discernable and understood by the students. Lastly, with the project that Carmen led, it was essentially a pilot in year one and then a revised pre/post assessment about the same program in year two. Because of this, there were naturally ways in which data use was occurring during the process. Carmen shared, “Yeah, because knowing how successfully they could answer those [pre-]questions meant that they weren’t learning it in the first-year seminar because they knew it already. So yeah, I think that the pre-[test] alone just illuminated what content was redundant.” All of the project facilitators were able to identify a point in time when they were engaging in the practice of data use prior to the conclusion of the assessment project, when use was defined as beginning.

The process itself, based on the templates that the division provides to staff to support the projects, really frames data use from an end of cycle timeframe, occurring after the data has been collected and analyzed and after the report has been written. This is the point in time that staff are asked about changes that will occur as a result of the assessment project. From the assessment report template to the assessment poster content form, the prompt for an action plan all stem from results-based data use. It does not seem that *use* that might have occurred in the midst of the project prior to completion is what is being asked about.

Where there seems to be some piqued interest and some possibility is with long-term *use* and what could unfold if such an approach was taken over time. While in the 2016-17 assessment reports staff were prompted to refer back to the previous year’s project and indicate what changes were implemented over the course of the year, longer-term *use*, in practice, was not readily identifiable. Rosemary suggested that, with fifteen years of department assessment reports, there could be an opportunity for a meta-analysis exploring what was learned over the years and what story is being told. She went on to say, “I always go back to, ‘Where’s our data?’ To have that repository, and easily accessible, and knowing what's there, we should all have access to that so that it can be something that we can pull out to help tell that story.” She also referred to a project not included in this study in order to make the connection between the idea of multiple layers and perspectives of data use at varying levels of the organization. Rosemary spoke about a recent organizational decision that was on the table and how she looked back at previous assessment reports to help build a case:

> So what could have been a data point that was really important for [department] in changing the programming that it was doing, became a very different data point to, well, "What's the value of this department and what are you doing?" And what programming? We could say, "You know, we do this, this, and this because of this assessment that we had done."

This is an example of an assessment that likely resulted in instrumental programmatic change within a department that, years later, had symbolic use in a politically driven organizational decision.

Leo found this idea of long-term *use* an interesting proposition and said, "…Being able to revisit previously collected data and considering the insights it would have in a different moment of time is something I would be willing to support if the data was collected with a level of methodological rigor." On this notion of rigor, Joe felt as though he hasn't seen long-term *use* due to some limitations, but he does see possibilities. He notes,

> Some of that has been until this most recent project. Often the projects were so narrow in scope that the shifts had been made or the programs had changed so dramatically that, yeah, we just haven't gone back. Do I think we could go back to this project in the future? Absolutely. This project was significantly different than any project we had done prior.

With regards to that most recent project from Joe and Carmen's department, Carmen was the only assessment facilitator who found herself at times thinking back on what had been learned through an assessment and was "still using it." Elena reflected that, while it has been too soon to consider what long-term *use* may come from the project she facilitated, if she went back and listened to the interviews again, she might walk away with new or different interesting insights.

There is a recognition that assessment data use can occur at various points in time and thus should not be framed only through end of cycle *use* that coincides with writing the assessment report. For some, *use* might begin with conducting the assessment or end of cycle, and then again in long-term *use*. Participants seemed to have the most interest, and see the greatest possibility, in long-term *use*.

Findings Summary

In this case study I explored student affairs professionals' experiences and perceptions of assessment data use in the context of student learning outcomes assessment. The study focused on the practice of data use within a division of student affairs with an established assessment initiative through nine semi-structured interviews with staff members, each with different levels of involvement with an annual assessment project process and each at varying levels within a single organization. The case study was also supported through document analyses of eleven documents that included project plans, reports, and posters. While data use in the evaluation world is of central focus, within higher education assessment, and in particular student affairs assessment, assessment data use has not been studied as robustly and, as a result, is under-conceptualized for practitioners. Utilizing a conceptual framework that included Coburn and Turner's (2012) focus on the practice of data use, Kirkhart's (2000) theory of influence, Mark and Henry's (2003) mechanisms of evaluation influence, and Jonson et al.'s (2015) integrated model of assessment influence, I explored student affairs assessment from an expanded point of view. These frameworks provided the language and the tools to unpack this rather vague concept of *use* and allowed me to apply evaluation concepts within the context of higher education and student affairs assessment.

The majority of this chapter focused on the overall themes that emerged from the data analysis and addressed each of my research questions.

1. What Informs the Construct of Use?

Each of the study participants' own experiences helped to shape their understanding of assessment and data use. The individual professional backgrounds and previous experiences of staff inform the lens through which they view assessment. Without formal assessment training, the study's participants understanding of data use was greatly shaped by the way in which ASU's assessment staff, Leo and Olivia, framed *use* through the divisional assessment planning and reporting templates. These templates help to define what *use* looks like and the level to which *use* is valued.

2. Beyond Instrumental Use

While each assessment project included evidence of instrumental use in the form of changes and program improvements, it was through conversations with the staff that other forms of assessment data use were also described. Student affairs assessment data use goes beyond instrumental use and the traditional lens of what the final step in the assessment cycle represents. There is a missed opportunity when staff is only asked to report on instrumental use in their assessment reports.

3. People, Organizational Processes, & Rewards

In exploring assessment data use within the context of a single student affairs organization, it was important to explore the organizational factors that contribute to or inhibit data use. People and relationships are at the heart of the practice of assessment data use and have helped to create a culture of assessment at ASU. The support that the assessment staff provide to the individual departments is critical to the success of assessment at ASU, as is having an assessment champion within the division who helps keep people motivated and encouraged about assessment. A time and space to celebrate assessment through the Assessment Symposium to recognize best practices allows for greater discussion and connection and contributes to a positive culture of assessment. What is missing, however, is a rewards structure into which staff buy in and that offers incentives for good assessment. This study helped to illuminate the fact that process is a double-edged sword for assessment and serves as a way to clearly support staff and guide them through their assessment projects, but also can become about timelines, accountability, and structure that places emphasis on the individual steps, losing sight the of ultimate use of the assessment.

4. Assessment Data Use at Different Levels of the Organization

Assessment data use should look different at each level of the organization. What might be deemed as instrumental or process use at the individual level from the perspective of the assessment facilitator, might look like conceptual or symbolic use at the interpersonal (departmental) and collective (Division) levels. The structure and focus of the projects may limit value that can come from the assessment projects in terms of decision-making at the divisional level, but staff want to see the leadership demonstrating assessment data use.

5. Impact of Time

A number of factors related to time play a significant part in affecting assessment data use. While the time and effort that go into these assessment projects should be noted, this study suggests that at ASU, time drives the process of assessment. This process is also affected by the timing of the assessment project cycle and plays a part in which programs and services are assessed annually. Additionally, the annual cycle of the assessment projects led the participants in this study to express feelings of being in a constant state of data collection with little time to spend specifically on interpretation and application of the assessment.

Overall, the data was invaluable to understanding the elements of the process and culture within the division that both help to support and, in some ways, limit the ways that the assessment projects have benefited ASU. This study examined the various forms of assessment data use; organizational features that contribute to or detract from use; how data use looks different from three different vantage points of the division; and lastly, how time is a critical factor that impacts the process and staff members' ability to focus on this important yet overlooked part of the assessment process.

In the final chapter, I will discuss findings, implications for practitioners, recommendations for future research, and offer a final reflection from my perspective as a researcher and assessment professional.

CHAPTER 5

DISCUSSION

Over the past three decades, student affairs assessment, as an organized functional area, has matured and established itself as an essential and expected component within higher education in the United States (Elkins, 2015; Ewell, 2002; Henning & Roberts, 2016). As the student affairs assessment movement in higher education began and continued to grow, there was an initial need for literature focused on operationalizing assessment in order to provide practitioners with resources on how to conduct effective assessment and build assessment capacity (Henning & Roberts, 2016). At present, though, a void exists in the literature in the area of empirically understanding the overall impact of assessment and, in particular, assessment data use. Data use is a core construct within evaluation literature (Henry & Mark, 2003) and is an identified construct of the assessment process or cycle used in higher education (e.g. Suskie, 2012; Yousey-Elsener et, al. 2015). The concept of assessment data use, however, is more complex and nuanced in practice, especially when compared to the narrow and linear definition often equating use of assessment results to direct programmatic and policy changes (Jonson, et al., 2015; Kirkhart, 2000). If applied solely through the construction that data use suggests improvement and change alone, the value of assessment in higher education, and more specifically student affairs, might appear to be lacking (Jonson, et al., 2015). As Baker et al. (2012) note, many colleges and universities are collecting data on student learning, but it is not clear as to how assessment results are being used.

The main purpose of the current study is to describe the practice of assessment data use in student affairs. This study contributes to the field of student affairs by providing contextual evidence of the various forms of assessment data use, as well as by providing insight into the factors that affect *use* through various organizational structures and processes. The findings from this study illuminate the need for practitioners to not only broaden their paradigm of assessment data use, but also mitigate the limitations that might affect the practice of data use in student affairs.

Organization for the Chapter

This chapter is organized into five sections. First, I present a discussion of the findings as they relate to existing literature. Second, I outline a set of implications and recommendations for practitioners, particularly student affairs assessment facilitators, to consider as a means to rethink and broaden how we frame assessment data use. Third, I provide implications for future research on the topic of student affairs assessment data use that would further contribute to this study in different ways. Fourth, I wrap up this chapter by providing my own reflection on the experience of conducting this study both as a researcher and as a student affairs assessment professional. Lastly, I provide a concluding summary of this study and its contributions in the context of student affairs assessment.

Overarching Findings

This study relied on evaluation constructs from Jonson et, al. (2015), Kirkhart (2000), and Henry and Mark (2003), applying their conceptual literature on evaluation use to the context of student learning outcomes assessment in student affairs while incorporating the different evaluation use taxonomies from Caracelli (2000), Leviton & Hughes (1981), Patton (2008), and

Weiss, (1977). This approach provided an alternative framework from which to understand assessment data use through a different yet complementary lens in higher education and student affairs. In conducting this study, there were a number of key findings that address the overarching research questions and sub-questions that are important for professionals in the field to consider.

Language Matters

This study suggests that how we frame assessment data use leaves a void when it comes to fully articulating and understanding the broader impact of assessment. What the participants shared about their experiences was more powerful than a simple articulation of how the program was improved through the results of the assessment. By applying Kirkhart's (2000) call to move from data *use* toward data *influence*, this paradigm shift can begin to broaden our understanding of that final step of the assessment cycle.

When embarking on this study, I did not anticipate the degree to which this research would underscore how much language matters and has an effect on how we, as a field in student affairs, have come to understand and apply the concept of assessment data use. In Chapter 2, I opened the literature review by defining some key terms. However, more than providing definitions for the sake of the reader's basic understanding, I focused on language associated with assessment, evaluation, utility, and *use* to frame these concepts, which are often used interchangeably and understood by people in different ways depending on the professional sector with which one is affiliated. Both Kirkhart (2000) and Patton (2000) asserted that the language selected and how it is applied helps shape perceptions and understandings of evaluation. This study builds on that argument for student affairs assessment. There was a noted difference between how they defined the term *use,* the examples of *use* articulated within their assessment report, and how they spoke about the experience around these assessment projects and the overall assessment initiative as it relates to the practice of data use. Wise and Aaron (2015) suggest developing a common language around assessment with divisions of student affairs, as did Henning and Roberts (2015), though the latter did not include the term *use* in their glossary list of terms. There is even more of an imperative for higher education and student affairs to think about how the words we choose have helped shape what assessment is and what it means to use data. This was particularly true for participants in this study who noted the lack of formal training or courses on evaluation and assessment as part of their own experience.

While the participants did not articulate evaluation term-specific language around the different forms of *use*, they were talking about multiple forms of *use*. Kirkhart (2000) discussed the awkward nature of the word *use* and suggested that *influence* is a more inclusive term that recognizes the complexity and nuances of evaluation. I concur that a shift to data *influence* changes the paradigm. The word *influence* versus *use* is more in-line with Blaich and Wise (2010), who argued the Wabash Study was intended to supplement and inform, not to tell the truth. Data influence suggests it is supplemental and one among a number of experiences and insights about a program being assessed, rather than the absolute as we have perhaps made data use out to be in terms of informing decisions and improving or changing programs. This is consistent with findings from the study that staff found additional or simultaneous value in assessment data use beyond taking action and making improvements to programs and services. However, when not provided the language or the opportunity to reflect on more expansive forms of data influence that came from conducting the assessments, practitioners are limited to reporting only instrumental use, which, depending on the project, might not be as significant in relation to the scope of the assessment. As such, the findings suggest that student affairs assessment professionals should reconsider this missed opportunity to more broadly define *use* and provide further space and prompts to ask staff about the multiple forms of *use* that may come from conducting assessment.

Additionally, the concept of data use, primarily viewed as instrumental use (Jonson, et al., 2015; Kirkhart, 2000; Mark & Henry, 2004), was further reinforced in this study through an analysis of a number of documents relied on by staff to help them craft their projects and build their reports. While participants were appreciative that the assessment templates served as guiding documents for their plan, report, and poster, the terms included in these templates also helped shape what data use means, what the division expects, and perhaps values. Having such assessment templates are consistent with what Christakis and Bureau (2015) and Wise and Aaron (2015) suggest is needed in creating an assessment infrastructure as well as building capacity to conduct assessment. As Patton (2000) suggests, the evaluation language used shapes perceptions of evaluation and in turn, this study suggests the same for the language of assessment. As such guiding documents and templates that are used to help guide and support practitioners through assessment planning and report need to be reviewed to determine how if at all it might be limiting how use is viewed when only asking about decisions and improvements and calling it an “action plan” that could lead a practitioner to believe it would not be acceptable to include other forms of assessment use outside of specific improvements that stem from the assessment results.

The rubric the Assessment Committee’s uses to provide feedback to the staff on their respective assessment project reports assigns points to each project with the highest scores tied to recommendations that are connected to results of the assessment and that have a clear plan of action, including an implementation timeline. Using the rubric, the committee assigns a value to how well the assessment report articulates what the staff most gained from the project. If the findings included in the report do not fall within those rubric guidelines, the project is scored lower. Thus, if *use,* as defined by the project, is not results-based or does not lead to specific actions to modify the program being assessed, the project is not deemed as strong. Between the terms and how they are applied, the templates shape how staff come to understand assessment data use and what the division values. In combination, these templates direct the staff to only report on results-based instrumental use and thus unintentionally communicate this type of *use* is what is valued most.

Student affairs assessment data use needs to be broadened to demonstrate greater impact.

The purpose of this study was not to explore whether assessment data use occurs, but rather to understand what *use* looks like from the perspective of student affairs practitioners and to see what different types of assessment data use exist. Participants provided examples or talked about assessment data use from multiple taxonomy standpoints. This research suggests that the influence of student affairs assessment goes beyond the way in which we have defined its purposes of description and improvement (Astin, 1991; Banta & Palomba, 2015; Upcraft & Schuh, 1996; Walvord, 2010). When asking the participants what they believed *use* means, their responses skewed toward instrumental use, or using the results for decisions, improvement, and change. Yet, when unpacking their experience with the assessment process and what data use looks like, the types of assessment use shifted to other forms of *use* not typically included in assessment reports. This finding is important in moving toward a more inclusive approach to what constitutes assessment data use within student affairs.

This study demonstrated evidence of planned or perceived instrumental, process, conceptual, and symbolic use through the assessment projects. This is similar to Green, et al. (2008) who also found evidence of *use* in the form of decision-making around student learning outcomes assessment that included instrumental, process, and conceptual use. The difference between these two studies, though, is that Green, et al. (2008) did not specifically use evaluation language or distinguish between different types of *use*. While Engberg, et al. (2015) found minimal *use* in terms of direct improvement or change, in this study, particularly through the assessment reports, the assessment project facilitators provided examples of direct instrumental use. It should be noted, though, that via the structure of the planning and reporting templates, there was a clear expectation that such instrumental findings needed to be included in the assessment report. This study also included examples of process use, though not to the extent of Peterson and Einarson's (2001) study which found the decision most influenced by assessment and most often reported was that of modifying student assessment plans or processes (Peterson & Augustine, 2000). This study provided examples of how staff have either self-reported or perceived use of assessment data that did not appear in the assessment project reports or posters. As such, there is an opportunity for student affairs to further explore and expand the types of assessment data use that practitioners are asked to think about when conducting and reporting on assessment. I argue that providing multiple forms of data use as potential outcomes of assessment will assist staff in seeing how much assessment has impacted their programs and services, themselves, and the greater division.

The practice of data use: Staff interactions and relationships are essential

The practice of data use (Coburn & Turner, 2012) is more than just using the results or closing the loop (Banta & Blaich, 2010). People and their interaction with others are at the heart of the practice of data use. Each of the three department projects underscored the importance of relationships in the assessment process. As with Ahren et, al. (2008), who presented a number of themes for successful data use, the theme of collaboration could also be found in this study. Between the relationships within the department with the assessment facilitator and their respective director, as well as the role of the divisional assessment committee providing multiple points of feedback to the assessment facilitators, this study showcased assessment as a collaborative process.

Like Henning and Roberts (2015), Henning (2015) suggested, an important part of developing a culture of assessment is to have an assessment champion or a divisional commitment to assessment (Schuh, et al., 2016). This study provides an example of such a champion in Leo and the role he plays for the division in supporting staff.

As the Assessment Coordinator, Leo's relationship with each of the assessment facilitators was an overarching factor for the successful completion of the assessment projects. Dana, Elena, and Carmen attributed the fact they found value in the projects they led to Leo's leadership. There were multiple touch points Leo had with the departments between the monthly facilitator meetings and one-on-one consultative meetings where Leo was able to assist or provide thoughtful feedback regarding the design or analytic phase of the assessment. Each of the project facilitators noted Leo's support, as did two of the directors.

Celebration and rewarding good assessment is critical in establishing a culture of assessment and thus encouraging greater use (Christakis and Bureau, 2015; Schuh et al., 2016). In this study, the assessment symposium exemplifies one division's attempt to celebrate assessment and to engage in conversation about the project. The divisional assessment symposium creates time and space not only for members of the greater division, but also campus partners and interested staff from neighboring universities, to engage in discussions with the facilitators and with one another about the assessment projects, ask questions, gain new insights on student learning, and create new connections and potential collaborations. Although the recognition at the symposium with best practice ribbons (which each of the departments in this study received) does not seem to contribute to data use, the event itself does.

Coburn and Turner (2012) described the practice of data use as one of interactions, and ASU models that approach through its assessment initiative. ASU, under the leadership of Olivia and Leo, has been intentional about creating community around assessment and involving as many staff as possible in the process. This is consistent with Henning and Robert (2015) and Woods and Schafer's (2015) notion that one of the most important roles for assessment staff in student affairs is to cultivate a culture of assessment that is collaborative and focuses on building relationships among staff. That culture can be seen in three different forms at ASU: the assessment facilitators meeting monthly as a group with Leo; the goal that department staff engage in through ongoing conversations about their assessment project in a given year; and celebrating assessment as a division through the Assessment Symposium event.

Process, structure, and time are intertwined, which impacts *use*

Time was a specific line of inquiry in the research design of this study, and it became a noted element of frustration expressed by the participants in the study. When meshed with process and structure around assessment, these three elements in combination present a limiting factor for data use. In order to structure student affairs assessments, individuals tapped to lead such efforts on campuses design processes, timelines, and annual reporting elements which adopt, perhaps unintentionally, a paradigmatic approach that tends more toward accountability. Christakis and Bureau (2015) articulated the importance of building an infrastructure with processes, schedules, and timeframes that fit within the cycle of assessment in place at a given institution. While ‘assessment is a process’ is a common phrase that is used, I contend that this study suggests that being mired in the process and overly focused on the planning and timeline elements affects ultimate data use.

In chapter four I described the assessment process as a double-edged sword in that the process has been both beneficial and detrimental to data use: beneficial as a mechanism for assessment facilitators to navigate their assessment project in manageable steps, but also detrimental in that it could act as a deterrent because, as some viewed the process, it is rigid and more about accountability than improvement. This study found that the greatest amount of energy was spent on the planning process itself, from developing the assessment question to designing the appropriate methodology. Leo hosted monthly meetings with the assessment facilitator group for the purpose of capacity building as well as for timeline and milestone check ins. Bentrim and Henning (2015), Henning (2015), and Schuh et al. (2016) all contend that a primary component of cultivating an assessment culture is assessment capacity building in order to help staff develop skills and knowledge.

The assessment process is also structured around a fiscal year, which runs from July to June. Fall is spent on assessment planning, final assessment reports are due in July, and poster presentations take place a few months later in October. Such a structure seems to discourage staff from basing any of the assessment projects on programs and/or services offered in the summer and fall, as they do not align with the process timeframe. This in itself is limiting.

Staff used vivid analogies when describing how the annual cycle of assessment feels, often equating it to being in an almost constant state of data collection. They evoked imagery including waves crashing, a revolving door, a rat race, and a roller coaster. With an annual cycle of expected department-based assessment projects, one cycle was ending while another one was about to get underway. As the staff articulated, this feeling of being in a constant state of data collection leaves little time for meaning making and engagement with the data for the purposes of *use*. This notion of time is consistent with one of the themes from Baker, et al. (2012) about allowing time for faculty and staff to make meaning of the assessment data. Rosemary argued that from her vantage point over the years, time drives the process, rather than the process or the needs of the assessment project driving the length of the assessment project. Time also determines whether the project and focus might be off-cycle with the current assessment process.

Kirkhart's (2000) integrated theory of influence recognized the role of time as it pertains to data use, the points in time in which data use may occur, and whether it is episodic or a process. This study mostly uncovered more end-of-cycle use coinciding with the reports and less instances of immediate use, but I believe much of that stems from how ASU structures the process and language which implies that staff should provide end-of-cycle use in their reports. Long-term use, though, was not mentioned as often in the discussions with participants. This may be attributable to a structure in which the projects are typically framed within a single fiscal year before the department moves onto the next topic for the subsequent year's assessment project. Because of this, reflection on previous years' assessments is not as engrained in the culture. It often seemed as though the sentiment from the participants was that once a project was submitted and the implementation plan was shared, it was unlikely that a department would return to that project.

Assessment data use differs between levels of the organization.

To explore the practice of data use, *use* should be considered at multiple levels of the organization (Kinzie, et al., 2015; Cousins, 2003; Henry & Mark, 2003). There is no one-size-fits-all approach to assessment data use at different levels of an organization. Participants in the study noted that from their perspective, assessment use is different and should be different depending on the level of the organization. Both Dana and Emily discussed the ways in which the role one plays in the organization influences how they might find *use* and what type of *use* might be most applicable to the conversations and decisions that are made at each particular level. The lens that staff bring to assessment, depending at what level they sit within the organization, will influence how they view data use.

While Kuh, et al. (2014), Kuh and Ikenberry (2009), Peterson and Augustine (2000), and Peterson and Einarson (2001) examined institutional level of *use* through the perspective of chief academic affairs officers, this study adds to the extant literature by looking at data use specifically in student affairs, and also from multiple levels and lenses within an organization.

This study found little evidence of how assessment has impacted decisions at the leadership level of the division. This is consistent with Kuh, et al. (2014), who noted that use of assessment findings to guide changes was more often cited at the department/program level rather than at an institutional level, as well as with the findings of Peterson and Augustine (2000) and Peterson and Einarson (2001) that assessment had marginal influence on educational decisions through their study with chief academic officers. It should be noted that through the parameters of this study, assessment data use was not explored at an institutional level as did Kuh, et al. (2014), Peterson and Augustine (2000), and Peterson and Einarson (2001). I argue, however, that the findings are comparable. Different forms of data use were found within the department, but two of the divisional staff members in this study said they had not found *use* from the projects using the lens of instrumental use. Similarly, in this study I was not able to find any examples of how assessments at the department level had impacted the division in terms of leadership and decision-making. Coburn and Turner's (2012) suggested that research should explore the relationship between the micro and the macro level, as well as how assessment at an individual level can potentially influence the entire organization for better or worse. In the case of this study, I do contend there has been a positive impact on the organization in terms of understanding assessment, assessment capacity building, and perceived legitimacy in relation to academic affairs as to the value student affairs brings to student learning.

In this study, improvement was more often articulated at the individual and department level, whereas accountability and perceived legitimacy may have been the greatest benefit at the divisional level. This is not surprising considering the tension in higher education between assessment for improvement versus assessment for accountability, and given that the scope of these projects was limited to a single program within a department. This study demonstrated various types of *use*, including instrumental use to improve the program; process use that included modifications to the assessment or capacity building from the perspective of the facilitator; and conceptual use that came from better understanding the student experience. At the divisional level, symbolic or political use in the form of legitimacy, demonstrating value, and contributions to learning appeared to be how *use* most often manifested itself through the assessment projects at ASU.

Implications for Practitioners

Based on the results this study, there are six primary recommendations I make for student affairs professionals, particularly those staff members who are responsible for leading assessment initiatives on their respective campuses.

First, as the assessment movement has matured in student affairs, it is imperative that there be a shift to an equal or greater focus on what has been depicted as the final step in the assessment loop, specifically that of using the assessment. It has been and continues to be important that scholars and practitioners spend time explaining the importance of assessment as an essential function within higher education (Henning & Roberts, 2016; Elkins, 2015; Ewell, 2002), including an emphasis on educating people on assessment planning and methodology. However, there is a greater need now to focus on what it means to use assessment data. In future publications, I believe it is important to heed Banta and Blaich's (2010) call to look to the field of evaluation to help inform student affairs assessment. As future books and articles are written about student affairs assessment, chapters and sections on use of assessment should more comprehensively unpack the concept of data use in the context of student affairs work. There is an opportunity to discuss types of data use, just as books often include sections on types of assessment (Henning & Roberts, 2016; Schuh & Associates, 2009), so as to provide examples of what assessment data use looks like looks like in its various forms: instrumental, process, conceptual, and symbolic use. Until this study, I had not considered other forms of use in an assessment context other than instrumental.

The second recommendation I make is that in order to expand our minds around the impact of student affairs assessment, we need to shift the paradigm by applying different language. This is consistent with Kirkhart (2000), Henry and Mark (2003), and Jonson, et, al. (2015) who acknowledged the importance of language and shifting the narrative from that of *use* to that of *influence*. Words such as *utilization*, *use*, and *data driven decision-making* have colored our understanding of what data use within higher education assessment entails. For example, when talking to Olivia about assessment use, when I reframed the question using the word "benefit," it seemed to open up more ways for her to talk about the concept of *use* and the impact assessment has had on the staff who facilitated the annual projects. In the same way, shifting to the word "influence" might have a similar effect. While in the evaluation world different forms of *use* are more commonplace, making an intentional word shift in assessment to refer to the final step in the cycle of assessment as "influence" might open the door to broadening what is meant when closing the loop.

My third recommendation goes beyond normative literature in that I encourage student affairs assessment practitioners on campuses to assess their assessment as Henning and Roberts (2015) suggest, asking questions such as: What are the broad goals of conducting regular assessment? Who is it meant to benefit most? At which level of the organization are such projects meant to influence most? Reflecting on how assessment has influenced or improved the staff, programs or services, and the overall division can be helpful in determining if the assessment initiative is achieving what was intended. One way this can be done is to revisit assessment reporting templates to include prompts that move beyond asking staff how an assessment might inform improvement or changes to the program or service that was the focus of the assessment. We should look to the field of evaluation and take a page in viewing assessment data use as not only instrumental, but also conceptual, process, and symbolic/political. We must also allow staff to reflect on their assessment and articulate any new understanding that may have been gained about their program, the student experience, or student learning, as well as what they learned through the process of conducting an assessment, be that skill development, a new attitude toward assessment, ways they would approach their assessment differently if they were to conduct it again, or how the assessment might be used politically on their campus. When limiting the data use to just that of instrumental use, we also limit the value that student affairs assessment might truly play on campuses across the United States.

Just as the Higher Learning Commission recommended ASU consider having departments conduct assessment projects on a two-year cycle, my fourth recommendation is that student affairs assessment professionals build intentional and substantial time into their processes to allow for engagement with the assessment data and to have a year in which to make meaning of the assessment data in order to influence the department or division where appropriate. As higher education professionals, we have become so mired in the administrative process with deadlines and connections to fiscal year parameters that, to the detriment of utility, we have not encouraged practitioners to think about what is needed most in terms of assessing programs. By creating what sometimes might be annual expectations of assessment projects, as in the case of ASU, staff are placed in a constant state of data collection, leaving little time to spend with the data in order to interpret the results and make meaning of what has been learned and for determining how the data could impact the program or themselves as professionals. Based on administrative timelines assessment projects might not match up with particular programs. Rather than time driving the process, as one of the participants pointed out, we should allow the research question to be answered, even if that takes multiple years if it helps improve the student experience.

My fifth suggestion is that the mapping process be used to help inform assessment questions that would cut across departments that are assessing learning from the same learning domain. There was both a clear desire and frustration expressed by the participants to see more evidence of divisional use from the assessment projects. As three participants noted, the boutique nature of most of the assessment projects with small sample sizes and specific student experiences tied to the programs being assessed has not led to much *use* at the divisional level from their perspective. Staff need to understand the intended goal of the assessment project initiative and who it is that benefits most. While the student learning outcomes of each department have been mapped to divisional learning outcomes, ASU has not used that mapping process to help inform assessment questions that would cut across departments each assessing learning from the same domain.

Finally, the sixth and final implication for practitioners recognizes the disconnect and missed opportunity that exists between divisional leadership and the staff within departments, who are charged with conducting assessment projects. I raise the question in the third implication as to whom the assessment is to benefit most? There is a desire by staff to see divisional leadership finding value in their assessment projects and having examples of how the assessment data has influenced the division. To help mitigate this disconnect, there needs to be a stronger connection both in the planning and in the feedback about the projects between senior leadership in the division and the departments that report to them. There is an opportunity in the planning phase for conversations to occur with divisional leadership sharing what questions or issues they are grappling with and how their departments' assessment projects might contribute to helping them address that question or issue. In that same conversation departmental staff could articulate either how they might be able to contribute or what assessment questions are most pressing for them at the department level, but in doing so it would open a dialogue between multiple levels of the organization.

Similarly, just a departments are responsible for submitting an assessment report that includes not only the findings, but forms of assessment use, divisional leadership should also be responsible for both reading the reports and responding with what they learned from the projects and how the assessments have informed their work. The value of these assessment projects should be reciprocal and senior leadership need to also demonstrate the influence of the assessment projects.

Implications/Recommendations for Future Research

This study specifically focused on assessment data use for projects tied to student learning outcomes. The first recommendation for future research is to focus on various types of assessment such as satisfaction, needs, benchmarking, and climate. There would be value in future research to explore similarities and differences between forms of data use depending on the type of assessment. One potential limitation with this study is that I only focused on assessment pertaining to student learning and its connection to data use. It would be beneficial to see how data use might look different depending on whether an assessment is centered on needs, satisfaction, student learning, or some other type of impact. Specifically, are there different forms of data use that are more prevalent depending on the type of assessment? I recommend future scholars conduct a study that compares assessment data use with different forms of assessment as this might reveal how different forms of *use* might be more prevalent depending on the type of assessment that was conducted.

A second recommendation for possible future research would be to employ Kirkhart (2000) or Jonson, et al.'s (2015) framework to examine assessment data use, but more specifically to design the study in such a way that the time elements of their framework can be examined as the assessment is being conducted. Thus, the study would begin at the start of the assessment planning so that *use* would be explored from start to finish, with various checkpoints and interviews or observations during the study, and would include a six-month follow-up. Such a study would enable a more deliberate examination of the impact of time and how various forms of data use may be occurring at different points in time during the assessment project. This design would enable researchers to look at data use, or influence, at three points in time: immediate, during the assessment project; end of cycle, at the time of the report; and long term, a longer term follow up to see if and how data use looked different at different times along the process.

A third recommendation for future research comes from one of the interview participants in discussing different ways that ASU could learn from more of a divisional approach to the assessment project focus areas. Rosemary suggested that with almost fifteen years of assessment projects, the Division at ASU, or other divisions with similar longevity, might be able to conduct a meta-analysis of what has been learned from their assessment projects. Similarly, I think there could be value in a more comprehensive case study that employed a meta-analysis of the all of the assessment projects for a particular division of student affairs.

My personal reflection as a scholar-practitioner on the experience of this study

As someone who has, for the past nine years, identified as a student affairs assessment professional, conducting this study facilitated and enlightened my thinking around data use and how I have framed assessment. The project gave me new ways to think about the way I set up assessment processes on the campuses I have worked in the past. While my earlier study (Engberg, et al., 2015) sparked my interest in this topic of data use as a needed area of study, particularly in student affairs, the current study allowed me to focus more on elements that enhance *use* as well as limiting forms of assessment data use and the impact of assessment work to be more fully realized.

A required course in my doctoral program was Evaluation in Higher Education. I remember questioning why it was that this class was not specifically an assessment class, as that is the approach that higher education has taken. I believe now, though, as Banta and Blaich (2010) suggested, we should look to the field of evaluation as it has helped me personally in providing an alternative lens through which to reframe my thinking around assessment in higher education. Previously, I did not take into account the role of language when it comes to assessment, differentiating between the words used, how we define them, and how the terms are interpreted into practice. Even in writing this dissertation, the word *use* can look grammatically awkward, but through considering the construct of *use*, I plan to move toward a paradigm of *influence* that Kirkhart (2000), Patton (2000), and Jonson, et al. (2015) all advocated.

I have begun to reconsider how much I have focused on the process of assessment, and how, in the past, I spent less time on the most important part of helping staff make meaning of what they just experienced and learned through conducting an assessment. Being wed to administrative processes, timelines, or academic or fiscal year calendars creates a significant limitation to how we ask staff to think about their programs, services, and larger questions that need to be answered through assessment. If their assessment question or program they would like to focus on does not match up to the project process that should not preclude the program from being assessed. If the project takes multiple years in order to answer the questions it raises, that should be acceptable as well. As Rosemary pointed out, time and process should not drive the chosen assessment question.

This study has also caused me to reflect on my part in inadvertently framing what *use* is and privileging instrumental use by the ways in which I ask about assessment plans and incorporated questions about what decisions or program modifications resulted from the assessment. This realization is a powerful one in that being the defined assessment champion on my respective campus, it was difficult to accept that I was the one who might be limiting *use*. However, my research for this dissertation provides me the insight and opportunity to expand how I frame and discuss assessment data use. This has led me to begin incorporating forms of data use in conversations with staff as we talk about assessment. I have begun to ask staff, as well as myself, questions like: What new understanding about the student experience came from conducting this assessment? What did you learn through the process of conducting the assessment and how might you improve the assessment instrument(s)? What did you learn about yourself in the process? How did the assessment confirm information you already knew anecdotally or justify a previous decision? How has the assessment resulted in an improvement or change in the program or service? In addition, what, if anything, came out of the assessment that was not planned for at the beginning of the assessment? Questions such as these can help staff to think more broadly about data use and the overall impact of conducting assessment in student affairs.

Conclusion

Overall, this case study provided insight into the practice of data use within the context of an individual student affairs organization with a strong culture of assessment. More research on the topic of assessment data use is needed to build upon this and other studies, as is further reflection on the part of student affairs assessment professionals about their role in shaping how staff think about assessment and perceive what it means to use assessment data. As we work in a highly political, ever-changing higher education landscape, leveraging assessment is critical, but in order to do so, we must broaden our conceptualization of assessment data use to that of influence in student affairs.

APPENDIX A

DOCUMENT ANALYSIS FIELD NOTES

Document ID: _____

Document Analysis Field Notes

<u>Type of Document</u>:

- o Assessment Report Template
- o Assessment Project Report
- o Assessment Project Poster
- o Other_________________

<u>Associate Vice President Area</u>:

- o Dean of Students
- o Diversity, Empowerment, & Inclusion
- o Student Development
- o University Ministry

Date of Document: _____________

Format of Document: Print Web-based

Topic of Assessment Project: ___________________

Type of Assessment:

___Survey ___Observation/Rubric ___Interviews/Focus Groups ___Document Analysis
___Other:

Number of Staff Involved:

1. Is use explicitly addressed in the document?

1a. If so, how?

2. How is data use described?

3. What type of use does it appear to be referring to?

- o **Instrumental**
- o **Conceptual**
- o **Symbolic**

- **Process**
- **Other:**

4. At what level is use described?

- **Individual**
- **Interpersonal**
- **Organizational**

5. How do the goals of assessment project and intended use match, if at all, with how use is described at the end of the assessment report?

6. Important quotes about data use:

7. Does information in this document corroborate or contradict other documents?

8. New documents to consider/additional documents referenced:

9. Questions that need to be addressed through interviews:

Value of Document to the Case: ___Low ___Medium ___High

General Notes/Comments

APPENDIX B

STUDENT AFFAIRS STAFF INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

Student Affairs Staff Interview Protocol
(Department Assessment Project Facilitator(s), Director)

Mock script pre-interview:

Interviewer: *(Make basic introductions—hello, names, etc.).* Thank you so much for agreeing to participate in this study and talk with me today. As you know I'm working on my PhD at Loyola University Chicago in Higher Education. My dissertation is focused on the practice of assessment data use within a student affairs context. While I have familiarity with the institution and Division, given my time here, I am approaching this study as an external researcher, so I ask that you not assume what I do or don't know about the assessment process. Before we begin, here is a participant consent form I have drafted in accordance with the Institutional Review Board's protection of human subjects. Please review the form, which includes the study's purpose, what is involved in your participation, risks and benefits, confidentiality, and your willingness to agree to participate. If you are fully comfortable with what is stated in the document, I ask that you please sign it. Keep in mind your participation is completely voluntary and while the hope is that I will present my findings to members of the Division, your name or identifying information will not be disclosed. This interview will be audio recorded and will be shared with a third party to transcribe the interview so you are also being asked to consent to the recording. I will share the transcript with you for you to review and confirm the accuracy of our conversation. Before we begin, do you have any questions for me?

Great! Thank you. Now let's begin with the interview. I am going to ask a series of questions pertaining to your experience with assessment and perceptions of data use as it relates to the assessment projects your department has recently conducted. There are no right or wrong answers and I am looking for your candid and thoughtful responses. Prior to the interview you were asked to also review one or more of your assessment projects and assessment symposium posters, which we will touch upon today.

Interview Questions:

Background Information

I want to begin by getting to know you and your role a bit more.

1. Tell me a bit about yourself in relation to your role at ASU.

    a. How long have you been in Student Affairs professionally?

    b. How long have you been at the University?

    c. What are the primary functions of your position?

d. In what ways, if any, do you view your role as having decision-making authority in your department?

Experience With and Role of Assessment

Given the topic, I want to get into the topic at hand, that of assessment.

2. What do you deem as the purpose of assessment in higher education and student affairs?

   a. Why does the Division engage in assessment from your perspective?

3. Tell me about your experience with assessment in your various roles in the profession, particularly at ASU.

   a. What kind of assessment training and education have you had (i.e. assessment and or evaluation course in graduate program, divisional workshop, conference presentations, books read, etc.)?

   b. What types of assessment have you conducted or been part?

   c. What percentage of your time would you say you have been involved with assessment?

   d. How have you been involved with assessment within your department?

Assessment Project

Let's shift gears and focus more specifically on the assessment project you were involved with.

4. As you know as part of the Division's assessment process, student learning outcomes assessment projects have been an annual component of the reporting cycle. And as part of the interview I asked that you review three documents: your assessment plan, your

assessment project report, and your assessment symposium poster. I have them here as well. So tell me about this particular assessment project you were involved with.

   a. What were the goals?
   b. What were you trying to answer?

5. Walk me through the planning process for the assessment project.
   a. Who was involved?
   b. What feedback did you receive?
   c. How, if at all, did the purpose of the project inform your design? More specifically, how if at all, did you plan on using the results of the assessment?
6. After you collected the data and analyzed it, tell me about the process you went through to interpret the findings and develop any recommendations.
   a. Who was involved in that process?
   b. How, if at all, was your Director (if not a director themselves) involved in the discussion and interpretation of findings?
7. What support or guidance did you receive on how to approach the interpretation of the findings as they related to your department's program or service?
8. Thinking back on the assessment project process, what do you think is the most emphasized component? Which part of the assessment report did you consider most important?

Practice of Data Use

As I mentioned, the focus of this study is on the practice of data use and what I mean by that is that data use is an interactive experience that looks at what occurs with the individuals involved in the assessment process as well as post collection during the meaning making and application of the assessment findings.

9. When you think of the assessment cycle (show model) and you hear the term "use" or "use the results", what does that concept mean to you?
   a. What comes to mind?
   b. What or whom informed that definition?
10. In relation to this assessment project, please describe to me, post recommendations and what you reported about use in the assessment report, how if at all, you used the results from the assessment project.
    a. Do you feel you used the assessment data? If so how?
    b. Look at how you described "use" in the assessment report and symposium poster, tell me more about what you meant.
    c. Are there other ways you found value or benefit from the assessment project? How did you personally benefit from conducting the assessment?
    d. If you didn't find use from this project, why do you think that was the case?

Organizational Factors

11. When you think about the Division, in what ways, if any, did it help you engage in assessment data use?
    a. What, if any, parameters were you provided on what constitutes how you might use the assessment data?
    b. What about the assessment project process (planning, report template, or any training related to facilitating assessment projects)?

c. What about the assessment committee project review and feedback meeting?

d. How does preparing for and presenting your poster at the assessment symposium enhance use, if at all?

e. Do you feel there are rewards if you do use the assessment? If so, from whom?

12. What challenges, if any, limit your ability to make use of the assessment data you collected through this project?

a. In what ways, if any, does the process or structure of the report inhibit use?

b. In what ways, if any, have you been taught or coached on how to engage is the use of assessment data?

c. Why do you think there have been limitations to use?

13. In what ways, if any, does the practice of data use depend on the role you have in the Division?

a. Is there any difference between how you use the assessment data versus your Director?

b. How do you think the assessment staff have used the assessment data?

c. What about the AVP's and VP, how do you think if at all they use the assessment data from these projects?

Element of Time

I want to move to the last section of the interview, which focuses on time as a factor related to your use of assessment data related to this project

14. In what ways, if any, does the amount of time you have available for assessment influence your use of the data?

a. Do you feel you have ample time to engage in data use with your assessment?
b. What are your thoughts on the frequency of the assessment projects or connection to the annual reporting cycle?
c. In what ways, if any, does assessment data use differ depending on different points in the process such as during collection, upon writing the report, months or a year after the report has been submitted?

15. What else do you want to share with me about your thoughts around assessment data use with the student learning related assessment projects?

Thank you sharing your thoughts and perspectives with me today. I truly appreciate your time and contributions to this study. As a reminder, I audio recorded our interview. I will be in touch in a few weeks with the interview transcript for you to review to make sure everything was captured correctly. As I review the transcript as well, I might follow up on any questions I have. Sound good? Have a great rest of your day and thank you again.

APPENDIX C

STUDENT AFFAIRS SENIOR STAFF INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

Student Affairs Senior Staff Interview Protocol
(Assessment Staff, AVP, VP)

Mock script pre-interview:

Interviewer: *(Make basic introductions—hello, names, etc.).* Thank you so much for agreeing to participate in this study and talk with me today. As you know I'm working on my PhD at Loyola University in Higher Education. My dissertation is focused on the practice of assessment data use within a student affairs context. While I have familiarity with the institution and Division, given my time here, I am approaching this study as an external researcher, so I ask that you not assume what I do or don't know about the assessment process. Before we begin, here is a participant consent form I have drafted in accordance with the Institutional Review Board's protection of human subjects. Please review the form, which includes the study's purpose, what is involved in your participation, risks and benefits, confidentiality, and your willingness to agree to participate. If you are fully comfortable with what is stated in the document, I ask that you please sign it. Keep in mind your participation completely voluntary and while the hope is that I will present my findings to members of the Division, your name or identifying information will not be disclosed. This interview will be audio recorded so you know and will be shared with a third party to transcribe the interview so you are also being asked to consent to the recording. I will share the transcript with you for you to review and confirm the accuracy of our conversation. Before we begin, do you have any questions for me?

Great! Thank you. Now let's begin with the interview. I am going to ask a series of questions pertaining to your experience with assessment and perceptions of data use as it relates to the assessment projects the Division's departments have recently conducted. There are no right or wrong answers and I am looking for your candid and thoughtful responses.

Interview Questions:

Background Information

I want to begin by getting to know you and your role a bit more.

1. Tell me a bit about yourself in relation to your role at ASU.

   a. How long have you been in Student Affairs professionally?

   b. How long have you been at the University?

   c. What are the primary functions of your position?

Experience With and Role of Assessment

Given the topic, I want to get into the topic at hand, that of assessment.

2. What do you see as the purpose of assessment in higher education and student affairs?

   a. Why does the division engage in assessment from your perspective?

3. Tell me about your experience with assessment in your various roles in the profession, particularly at ASU.

   a. What kind of assessment training and education have you had (i.e. assessment and or evaluation course in graduate program, divisional workshop, conference presentations, books read, etc.)?

   b. What types of assessment have you conducted or been prior to your current role at ASU?

   c. What percentage of your time would you say you have been involved with assessment currently?

Assessment Projects

Let's shift gears and focus on the division's student learning assessment projects.

As you know as part of the division's assessment process, student learning outcomes assessment projects have been an annual component of the reporting cycle.

4. What is the purpose of the departmental assessment projects?

   a. What are the goals?

   b. Are they meant more for continuous improvement or accountability from your perspective? Why is the focus more on one of the other?

5. What has been your role in supporting the departments' assessment projects at ASU?
    a. What feedback, if any, did you provide?
    b. At what point(s) in the process have you been involved (planning, data collection, interpretation, feedback on recommendations, etc.)
6. Thinking back on the assessment project process, what do you think is the most emphasized component? Which part of the assessment report did you consider most important?

Practice of Data Use

As I mentioned, the focus of this study is on the practice of data use and what I mean by that is that data use is an interactive experience that looks at what occurs with the individuals involved in the assessment process as well as post collection during the meaning making and application of the assessment findings.

7. When you think of the assessment cycle (show model) and you hear the term "use" or "use the results", what does that concept mean to you?
    a. What comes to mind?
    b. What informs that definition?
8. In relation to the assessment projects overall, please describe to me how, if at all, you used the results of the assessment projects.
    a. Are there other ways you believe the division has found value or benefit from the assessment project? How do you think they personally benefit from conducting the assessment?

b. In what ways, if any, did departments or the division use the results from this project?

Organizational Factors

9. In what ways, if any, has the division helped you engage in assessment data use?
    a. What about the assessment project process (planning, report template)?
    b. What about the assessment committee project review and feedback meeting?
    c. Do you feel there are rewards if you do use the assessment? If so from whom?
10. What challenges, if any, limit your ability to make use of the assessment data you collected through these projects?
    d. How might the process or structure of the report inhibit use?
    e. How have you been taught or coached on how to engage is the use of assessment data?
    f. Why do you think there have been limitations to use?
11. In what ways, if any, does the practice of data use differs depending on the role you have in the division?
    g. Is there any difference between how the department level assessment project facilitators use the assessment data versus a Director or AVP, etc.?
    h. (for assessment staff) How have you in your role leading assessment for the division used the assessment data?
    i. As the AVP/VP, how have you found use if at all from these projects?

Element of Time

I want to move to the last section of the interview, which focuses on time as a factor related to your use of assessment data related to this project.

12. What role if any does time play with the assessment projects and data use?
    j. Do you feel the staff have ample time to engage in data use with your assessment?
    k. What are your thoughts on the frequency of the assessment projects or connection to the annual reporting cycle?
    l. In what ways, if any, does assessment data use differ depending on different points in the process such as during collection, upon writing the report, months or a year after the report has been submitted? If so, how?
13. What else do you want to share with me about your thoughts around assessment data use with the student learning related assessment projects?

Thank you sharing your thoughts and perspectives with me today. I truly appreciate your time and contributions to this study. As a reminder, I audio recorded our interview. I will be in touch in a few weeks with the interview transcript for you to review to make sure everything was captured correctly. As I review the transcript as well, I might follow up on any questions I have. Sound good? Have a great rest of your day and thank you again.

APPENDIX D

STAFF MEMBER CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN RESEARCH

Staff Member Consent to Participate in Research

Project Title: The Practice of Student Affairs Assessment Data Use
Researcher(s): Mark Manderino (PI), Ph.D. candidate, Loyola University Chicago
Faculty Sponsor: Mark Engberg, Ph.D., Professor, Loyola University Chicago

Introduction:

You are being asked to take part in a research study being conducted by Mark Manderino for his dissertation study at Loyola University Chicago under the supervision of Dr. Mark Engberg, Professor in the Higher Education program at Loyola University Chicago.

You are being asked to participate because you meet all of the following criteria:

1. Your department has been recognized for a Best Practice Award with one or more of their assessment projects though the Division's Assessment Symposium between 2014-2016.
2. Your department Director has been in place for at least three years during the time period binding the case.
3. You are the primary staff member(s) facilitating the assessment project.
4. Your department represents one the of the four Associate Vice President areas.
5. OR, you are an identified key stakeholder as either an assessment staff member or Divisional leadership position.

Please read this form carefully and ask any questions you may have before deciding whether to participate in the study.

Purpose:

The purpose of this study is to understand how student affairs professionals engage in the practice of assessment data use and to what extent to they identify it as use.

Procedures:

If you agree to be in the study, you will be asked to participate in the following research components: You will be asked to participate in:
A 45-60 minute in person interview to discuss experiences with student learning outcomes assessment in Student Affairs. Conversations will focus on issues and factors related to assessment data use, organizational elements that support or inhibit data use, and the role time plays in impacting assessment data use.

Risks/Benefits:

There are minimal to no risks involved in participating in this research. While there are no are direct benefits to individual participants who participate in this study, findings from this dissertation study will benefit the researcher to better understand factors surround the practice of assessment data use in student affairs. Additionally, participants and the Division may benefit through conversations about what the findings mean in relation to current assessment practices.

Confidentiality:

During the interview process you will select a pseudonym so as to protect your anonymity, and the pseudonym will be kept on a password-protected computer. After the interview, a transcript (completed by a third party) will be emailed to you to ensure validity and accuracy of your statements.

This interview will be audio recorded and transcribed by a third party. All data involved in this study will be stored on a password-protected computer. Only the PI and the faculty sponsor will have access to these data (Email communications, audio recordings and transcripts).

When the study culminates, including writing and reporting findings through the dissertation defense, all data and information related to the study will be destroyed.

Voluntary Participation:

Participation in this study is voluntary. If you do not want to be in this study, you do not have to participate. If you decide to participate, you are free not to answer any question or to withdraw from participation at any time without penalty.

Contacts and Questions:

If you have questions about this research study, please feel free to contact Mark Manderino at mmanderino@luc.edu or the faculty sponsor, Dr. Mark Engberg, at mengber@luc.edu

If you have questions about your rights as a research participant, you may contact the Loyola University Office of Research Services at (773) 508-2689.

Statement of Consent:
I agree to participate in this interview/focus group, the audio recording of this interview, and to the use of this interview/focus groups as described above.

____ __________________
Participant’s Signature **Date**

____ __________________
Researcher’s Signature **Date**

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VITA

Dr. Manderino received his Bachelor of Arts degree in history from the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. It is at Illinois that his interest in working in higher education, particularly with co-curricular experiences, was sparked. He attended Indiana University, where he earned a Master of Science in Higher Education and Student Affairs. Dr. Manderino received his PhD in Higher Education from Loyola University Chicago with a cognate focus on organizational development. During his coursework at Loyola, Dr. Manderino served as a research assistant in the School of Education and at DePaul University as an Assessment Coordinator.

Dr. Manderino's research interests have focused primarily on assessment and data use, but he would like expand his research focus to explore factors associated with student engagement, as well as organizational factors that lead to greater organizational effectiveness in higher education.

Over the course of Dr. Manderino's career in higher education he has worked at a number of institutions in varied and progressive roles in multiple functional areas. His experience has focused in areas of fraternity and sorority life, student life and student engagement, alumni relations, assessment, and leading cross-functional planning and change initiatives at both private and public institutions in the midwest and west coast. Currently, Dr. Manderino serves as the Director of Student Affairs Planning & Assessment at the University of Illinois at Chicago