

# What's Next in Student Affairs Assessment?

*Insights from Current Graduate Education Practices*

March 2024

*A Joint Project from:*



**ACPA COMMISSION**  
for Assessment & Evaluation

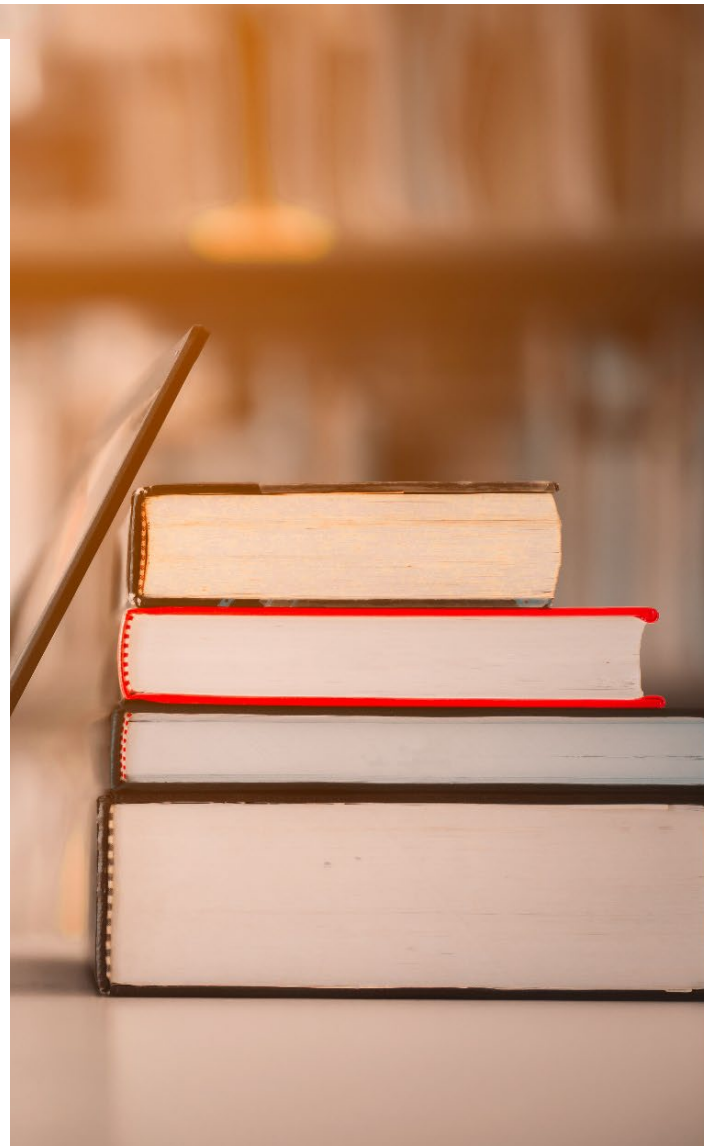


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# Table of Contents

Contributing Associations .....	3
Report Authors .....	3
Introduction .....	4
Analysis .....	5
Findings .....	6
Course Description and Focus .....	6
Course Learning Outcomes .....	9
Required Texts .....	11
Summary .....	14
Implications and Recommendations .....	15
Student Affairs Assessment Resources.....	16
References.....	17
Appendix .....	18

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# Introduction

Professional competency in assessment and research has evolved to be a core skillset for student affairs educators (ACPA & NASPA, 2015), with many graduate programs now requiring standalone courses centered on assessment. Assessment also plays a critical role in institutional change efforts through framing issues and informing which programs and practices are implemented (Mitchell & Dixon, 2022). However, the assessment skillsets taught in graduate education vary widely by program (Dean & Langham, 2022) and different types of institutions also emphasize disparate sets of competencies as influenced by culture and resources (Aaron & Cogswell, 2022).

The lack of a clear student affairs assessment curriculum complicates the process of course design for faculty and causes confusion among hiring managers and students alike about the basic skills needed to excel in this area. **The present project is a collaborative effort among three national associations based in the United States that analyzed over 100 syllabi to illuminate the state of graduate education in student affairs assessment.** By reviewing core course design features, outcomes, and texts, this analysis provides practical insights and suggests future directions for student affairs assessment.

***A Note on Student Affairs Assessment Terminology:*** This project was led by three organizations that share a focus on student affairs assessment. During our data collection and analysis, we found that while some courses focused specifically on student affairs assessment, others emphasized assessment in the broader higher education context (e.g., examining overall institutional effectiveness, evaluating impact of academic coursework, etc.). The authors also acknowledge that student affairs assessment is increasingly intertwined with broader institutional assessment directives (Henning & Roberts, 2024). While the present paper uses the terminology and standards of student affairs assessment, assessment practitioners across higher education institutions may find this report useful. Furthermore, we encourage student affairs assessment practitioners to reflect on the intersection of their work with broader institutional efforts and to incorporate practices from the institutional research field in general. We believe that students and institutions alike also will benefit from this exchange.

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# Analysis

The research team, composed of representatives from the three contributing associations, collected syllabi from courses with an assessment or evaluation focus in higher education or student affairs graduate programs from March through December 2023. Syllabi were collected using the email listservs of the respective and allied organizations and through outreach on LinkedIn and X (formerly known as Twitter). Faculty occasionally referred other instructors to the study who provided additional syllabi. To ensure a diverse geographic representation, the study team also contacted program administrators from the [NASPA Graduate Program Directory](#).

**A total of 115 syllabi were collected from 101 different institutions.** Several institutions offered more than one relevant course; both courses were included in the analysis if the content was distinct. See the **Appendix** for detailed information on the regional representation of the institutions and other contextual information on the syllabi.

## Project Limitations

- Syllabi are necessarily an incomplete representation of the full content of a course. It is possible that instructors revised syllabi midcourse or heavily supplemented with classroom activities, additional readings, guest lecturers, etc. not on the original syllabi. This project should therefore be viewed as a snapshot of course content and scope at the time of data collection.
- Of the programs contacted for information, 37% responded with applicable information. Those instructors who provided a syllabus did so voluntarily and out of interest to participate in the study. For some, institutional or departmental policies prevented them from sharing syllabi. Other respondents did not wish to reveal syllabi, which they felt were their private intellectual property. The research findings are therefore based on a sample of course syllabi from those willing and able to share.
- This study is the first comprehensive examination of higher education assessment syllabi. Thus, no prior research exists to steer analyses or to which findings may be compared.

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# Findings

For the analysis, the research team divided into three subgroups based on common attributes of course syllabi: overall course description, a list of expected student learning outcomes, and assigned texts. In this section, we review the methods, overall findings, and limitations for analysis of the syllabi components. Note that the number of syllabi analyzed are slightly different between sections given variations of applicability of the analysis to a given syllabus.

## Course Description and Focus

### Key Points

- 75% of syllabi included in the study focused on student affairs or higher education assessment broadly, with 33% of all syllabi focusing specifically on student affairs assessment.
- Nearly two-thirds of syllabi (64%) had a specific focus on research methods, with the vast majority (93%) incorporating both quantitative and qualitative methods.
- Even among student affairs assessment courses, limited alignment with established professional standards (e.g., the [ACPA/NASPA Professional Competencies](#) and the [CAS Standards](#)) was observed.

Analysis for this section was on reviewing course descriptions to identify the overall focus and intent of each course. In particular, the following research questions guided our study: what is the primary focus of these courses; what research methods were taught; and what, if any, professional standards or competencies were taught in these courses or used in instruction? Several syllabi were removed as they solely focused on research methods, bringing the total number of syllabi analyzed to 111.

Open coding was the primary coding method utilized. Open coding allowed researchers to break data into separate and distinct parts to gain a strong sense of each course's overall focus and goals (Saldaña, 2016). By the end of the coding process, **a total of 14 codes were used to code all syllabi from all regions.** These 14 codes were then

grouped together under thematic categories and were used to develop the primary themes and findings. Additionally, syllabi were reviewed for their use of research methodologies and professional standards.

## Results

A descending count of each primary course theme is provided in Table 1. The courses offered were generally introductory and did not scaffold into an opportunity for additional expertise or future course connections, at least as evidenced through the syllabus.

**Table 1. Count of primary themes for each syllabus.**

<b>Course category</b>	<b># of Syllabi</b>	<b>% of Syllabi</b>	<b>Primary course topics</b>
<b>Higher Education Assessment</b>	46	41.4%	Focuses on how assessment is integral in higher education. Topics include assessment, program evaluation, research, and accreditation.
<b>Student Affairs Assessment</b>	37	33.3%	Foundational assessment principles.
<b>Research</b>	12	10.8%	How to formulate research questions, conduct literature reviews, study design, instruments for data collection, and data analysis techniques.
<b>Program Evaluation</b>	7	6.3%	Program evaluation is the sole focus of the course.
<b>Classroom Assessment</b>	6	5.4%	Assessment of student learning in a classroom setting.
<b>Equity-Minded/Centered Assessment</b>	2	1.8%	Equity and how it intersects with assessment is the core foundation of the course.
<b>Counseling-Based Assessment</b>	1	1.0%	Assessment and evaluation principles are reviewed; but also included are a review of specific instruments, tests, assessments, and other measures used in clinical settings with counselors.

Of the 71 syllabi (64.0%) that included a focus on research methods, syllabi were coded for whether the course included quantitative, qualitative, and/or mixed methods. All but five of these syllabi either mentioned both qualitative and quantitative methods together or mixed methods. In the five syllabi that mentioned one methodology alone (aside from mixed methods), quantitative was the sole methodology mentioned.

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Analyzing the syllabi for mention of alignment with ACPA/NASPA Competencies and CAS Standards, 41 (36.9%) syllabi included professional competencies or standards. Overall, ACPA/NASPA Competencies were most often mentioned (28, or 25.2%), with CAS Standards mentioned 13 times (11.7%).

While it could be expected that the NASPA/ACPA Assessment, Evaluation, and Research (AER) competencies and CAS Standards would be integrated in Student Affairs Assessment courses, that was not always the case. A total of 18 Student Affairs Assessment courses included the AER competencies, 11 included the CAS Standards, and only seven courses included both AER competencies and CAS Standards on the syllabus. It was unclear whether these competencies and standards were either taught, used to align course content, or were merely assigned as reading to students.

### **Limitations**

- It was sometimes unclear where the syllabi were situated in the context of a departmental program. That is, it was unclear if the assessment courses were taken in the beginning, middle, or end of a program; if the course was an elective for other programs and thus needed to be kept to broad assessment topics; if the syllabus was current or was under review; etc.
- It was sometimes difficult to ascertain what codes the syllabi matched, further complicated by a lack of opportunity to follow up with instructors. For example, if a syllabus contained both qualitative and quantitative material, are the readers to assume a mixed methods approach? While the research team discussed coding with each other to discern where to place courses, a chance to reconnect with programs or more clarity in syllabi would be beneficial for future research.



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## Course Learning Outcomes

### Key Points

- All topics of the [ACPA ASK Standards](#) were represented in course syllabi, but some standards were more well-represented than others.
- The ASK standards that appeared most frequently were *Assessment Design* (22% of all SLOs) and *Effective Reporting and Use of Results* (13% of SLOs).
- The *Overall Purpose of Assessment* (8% of SLOs) and *Conducting a Theory/Literature Review* (6% of SLOs) frequently emerged as learning outcome topics not covered by the ASK standards.

Student learning outcomes (SLOs) were obtained from the syllabus of each course where available. In total, **706 SLOs were reviewed from 98 different courses**. Some syllabi were excluded from the analysis as they did not list learning outcomes. A team of four reviewers coded SLOs using the 13 content areas of the [ACPA ASK Standards](#).

Each SLO was categorized into one standard as the primary theme of that outcome. Several additional themes emerged as frequent topics not covered by the ASK Standards:

- **Overall Purpose of Assessment:** Included foundational assessment concepts, such as distinguishing between assessment and research, the importance of assessment in higher education, and the history of assessment in higher education.
- **Conducting a Theory/Literature Review:** Included being a critical consumer of scholarly sources, conducting literature reviews to support assessment and/or research projects, and summarizing theories that frame facets of student development and its assessment.
- **Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion in Assessment:** Included identifying and mitigating biases that can affect assessment, utilizing culturally-responsive approaches to assessment, and recognizing the implications and opportunities in assessment for social justice.
- **Culture of Assessment:** Included recognizing characteristics of a team that values evidence-based decision making and applying strategies to advance assessment across functional areas.

- **Accreditation:** Included summarizing the purpose of accreditation, detailing the standards for maintaining accreditation, and implementing processes to fulfill reporting requirements.

These emerging themes were indicated as the primary theme to categorize the SLO when used.

## Results

A descending count of each primary SLO theme is provided in Table 2.

**Table 2. Count of primary themes for each course student learning outcome.0**

Key: ASK Standard Emerging Theme

Primary Theme	SLO Count	% of All SLOs
Assessment Design	152	21.5%
Effective Reporting and Use of Results	90	12.7%
Selection of Data Collection & Management Methods	62	8.8%
Emerging theme: Overall Purpose of Assessment	53	7.5%
Emerging theme: Conducting a Theory/Literature Review	44	6.2%
Assessment Education	42	5.9%
Program Review & Evaluation	40	5.7%
Assessment Methods: Analysis	39	5.5%
Articulate Learning & Development Outcomes	38	5.4%
Politics of Assessment	35	5.0%
Assessment Ethics	33	4.7%
Emerging theme: Culture of Assessment	17	2.4%
Assessment Instruments	17	2.4%
Emerging theme: DEI in Assessment	16	2.3%
Surveys Used for Assessment Purposes	11	1.6%
Emerging theme: Accreditation	10	1.4%
Interviews & Focus Groups used for Assessment Purposes	4	0.6%
Benchmarking	3	0.4%

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## Limitations

- Interrater reliability was not assessed.
- Some SLOs cover multiple themes, but only the theme the reviewer believes to be most significant is identified in this analysis.
- Some SLOs are written in general terms, requiring assumptions about the specific objectives intended. Therefore, the absence of a primary theme does not mean that the associated content area was not covered in the course.
- The courses were not all designed with the same intent or purpose. Some courses were solely dedicated to assessment, whereas others were a combination of topics.

## Required Texts

### Key Points

- 68 unique texts were assigned across the 98 syllabi in which materials were required.
- Over half (55%) of syllabi assigned at least one of three core texts:
  - *Student Affairs Assessment: Theory to Practice* by Gaving Henning and Darby Roberts
  - *Assessing Student Learning: A Common Sense Guide* by Linda Suskie
  - *Assessment in Student Affairs* by John Schuh et al.
- These core texts were more popular in courses focused on student affairs and higher education assessment.
- Core texts were frequently supplemented by more specialized materials, particularly on different research methodologies and program evaluation.

This analysis attempted to discern the core texts that are informing graduate education in higher education assessment, and in turn influencing overall approaches to assessment in the student affairs profession. Each syllabus was reviewed for any texts that were required for the course, with the assumption that students are more likely to purchase and/or download the material to reference long-term beyond the duration of the course. The researchers then reviewed publicly available information on material, including publisher summaries, table of contents, and excerpts. Each text was coded for its relevancy to student affairs assessment, depth of content, inclusion of diverse assessment techniques, and use of pedagogical tools.

Sixteen courses did not have any specifically assigned texts but stated that materials would be provided weekly via an online module, resulting in the final analysis including 68 assigned texts from 98 courses.

## Results

Table 3 displays the texts required across three or more courses taught by distinct instructors.

**Table 3. Texts required across three or more courses with distinct instructors.**

Text Citation	# of Courses Requiring Text	% of Courses Requiring Text
*Henning, G., & Roberts, D. (2024). <i>Student Affairs Assessment: Theory to Practice</i> . Routledge.	34	35.7%
*Suskie, L. (2018). <i>Assessing Student Learning: A Common Sense Guide</i> . Wiley.	14	14.3%
*Schuh, J.H., Biddix, J.P., Dean, L.A., & Kinzie, J. (2016). <i>Assessment in Student Affairs</i> . Wiley.	13	13.3%
*Banta, T.W., & Palomba, C.A. (2014). <i>Assessment Essentials: Planning, Implementing, and Improving Assessment in Higher Education</i> . Wiley.	10	10.2%
Kuh, G.D., Ikenberry, S.O., Jankowski, N.A., Cain, T.R., Ewell, P.T., Hutchings, P., & Kinzie, J. (2015). <i>Using Evidence of Student Learning to Improve Higher Education</i> . Wiley.	5	10.2%
*Fitzpatrick, J.L., & Worthen, B.R. (2023). <i>Program Evaluation: Alternative Approaches and Practical Guidelines</i> . Pearson.	4	5.1%
Wise, V.L., & Davenport, Z.R. (2019). <i>Student Affairs Assessment, Evaluation, and Research: A Guidebook for Graduate Students and New Professionals</i> . Charles C Thomas Publishing.	4	4.1%
Suskie, L. (2014). <i>Five Dimensions of Quality: A Common Sense Guide to Accreditation and Accountability</i> . Wiley.	3	4.1%
Biddix, J.P., Renn, K.A., & Roper, L.D. (2018). <i>Research Methods and Applications for Student Affairs</i> . Wiley.	3	3.1%
Sriram, R. (2017). <i>Student Affairs by the Numbers Quantitative Research and Statistics for Professionals</i> . Routledge.	3	3.1%

\*Texts marked with an asterisk have multiple editions. Only the most recent edition is cited.

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Above half of all courses required only one text, but some courses required up to three materials. In 54 courses (55.1%), at least one of the top three texts were assigned, suggesting that these texts may be particularly influential in student affairs assessment. At least one of these three core texts is required in 44 (60.3%) of all courses with a focus on higher education or student affairs assessment.

The American Psychological Association Writing Style Guide was also a frequently required text but is excluded from Table 3 as many instructors recommend that students access the resource through the APA website.

Further analysis of required texts suggested that instructors use a core text that describes overall approaches and processes of assessment, which are then supplemented with materials detailing specific methods or issues. Seventeen of the required texts dealt specifically with methods (seven focused on quantitative methods, four on qualitative methods, and four on general methods) and nine focused specifically on program evaluation. Topics of other texts included higher education issues in general or assessment more specific to the program (e.g., classroom-based assessment for a general education curriculum).

### **Limitations**

- Texts were analyzed by summary only. An in-depth review of the materials may produce further insights.
- This analysis excluded recommended and optional readings.
- Instructors likely assigned articles and supplementary book chapters throughout the course. Week-by-week readings were not included for most syllabi submitted for this project, and thus were not part of this analysis.
- A common practice of instructors is to change the texts assigned by semester. Syllabi may have changed to include texts that were published shortly before or after the data collection period.

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# Summary

This analysis suggests that the proliferation of assessment courses across the higher education graduate curriculum has not resulted in one cohesive curriculum. Rather, student affairs programs that offer a course on assessment do so to address different purposes based on their programmatic needs. For instance, counseling-focused courses were found within counseling-based student affairs programs, while some student affairs tracks within a higher education degree program offered assessment courses that included topic coverage of program evaluation, with an aligned shift in learning outcomes and texts. **Courses were thus not simply designed to have students gain assessment knowledge, but to fit within a larger program that was responsive to other course content, student populations served by the program, and programmatic focus overall.**

Despite the diversity in curriculum, several overall themes emerged from this analysis:

1. **Emphasis on Assessment Design and Data Collection:** Across both the course focus and learning outcomes analysis, most courses appeared to primarily focus on creating quality assessments and varying methods for collecting and analyzing data.
2. **Less Attention to Institutional Contexts and Politics of Assessment:** Perhaps due to the rigor of instruction around quality assessment, courses appeared to have less content on navigating a given institutional context and politics affecting dissemination and interpretation of assessments.
3. **Lack of Clear Application of Standards:** While standards were occasionally discussed, application was inconsistent across the syllabi, even among courses specific to student affairs.
4. **Use of Diverse Methodologies:** Quantitative (especially surveys), qualitative, and mixed method assessment designs were frequently discussed among courses that incorporated material on methodologies.
5. **Some Programs Emphasize Program Evaluation or Research:** Most higher education assessment courses focused on assessment from a generalist lens, but program evaluation or a more robust examination of various methodologies were common subtopics depending on program.

# Implications and Recommendations

## Emerging Professionals

- Be aware that there is not one standard way of approaching assessment. Continue to engage with local and national organizations to learn about different assessment practices and ideas.
- Review the professional competencies and standards for assessment and your functional area if not part of your graduate curriculum.

## Student Affairs Educators

- Recent graduates are entering the field with different knowledge bases and experiences around assessment. Include education around assessment basics and expectations for assessment in new hire orientation.
- Staff from HESA graduate programs may have less education about the political facets of assessment and could benefit from professional development in this area.

## Assessment Professionals

- Given the diversity of training experiences from graduate programs, provide ongoing professional development around functional area assessment, particularly around application of assessment findings and navigating institutional contexts.
- Coordinate with any existing institutional student affairs graduate program(s) to help inform curricular development to fit divisional professional development needs.

## HESA Faculty

- Purpose and content of the reviewed courses were not always clear. Ensure that the context for the course is transparent to students, in addition to how knowledge will be used and focus of the course.
- As most programs address assessment in one standalone course and students are likely entering as novices, consider shifting final projects to providing commentary and critique of existing work rather than creating original assessments or assessment plans.
- Regularly review the course syllabus to ensure materials are inclusive of current and emerging assessment practices.
- Course materials tended to be jargon heavy. Language clarity for those unfamiliar with assessment may help provide more meaningful entry points into the content and processes under study.

## Student Affairs Professional Organizations

- Professional competencies and standards are not being used routinely across graduate programs. As standards are revised, consider whether there is a provided path for ongoing learning and development.
- Consider developing teaching guides around competencies and standards to support their use in graduate education.
- Facilitate opportunities to connect HESA faculty with assessment professionals to discuss graduate preparation.

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## Student Affairs Assessment Resources

*Below are some recommended resources beyond the texts frequently assigned in courses that may benefit professionals seeking to learn more about assessment in the student affairs and higher education context, or to support faculty in identifying emerging assessment practices.*

### Getting Involved with Student Affairs and Higher Education Assessment

[ACPA Commission for Assessment and Evaluation](#)

[NASPA Assessment, Evaluation, and Research Knowledge Community](#)

[Student Affairs Assessment Leaders](#)

[Association for the Assessment of Learning in Higher Education](#)

[Association for Institutional Research](#)

[Grand Challenges in Assessment Project](#)

### Professional Standards and Competencies

[Council for the Advancement of Standards in Higher Education](#)

[NASPA/ACPA Professional Competency Areas for Student Affairs Educators](#)

[Assessment Skills and Knowledge Content Standards](#)

### Texts on the Present and Future of Student Affairs Assessment

Henning, G.W., Baker, G.R., Jankowski, N.A., Lundquist, A.E., & Montenegro, E. (Eds.). (2022). [\*Reframing assessment to center equity: Theories, models, and practices.\*](#) Routledge.

Henning, G.W., Bentrim, E.M., Yousey-Elsener, K. (Eds.). (2024). [\*Coordinating divisional and departmental student affairs assessment.\*](#) Taylor & Francis.

Mitchell, A., & Dixon, K. M. (Eds.). (2022). [\*New directions for student services: Nos. 178-179. Student affairs assessment: Nuanced practice to leverage equity.\*](#) Wiley.

Parnell, A. (2021). [\*You are a data person: Strategies for using analytics on campus.\*](#) Routledge.



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# Appendix

## Detailed Description of Methods

To gather syllabi from student affairs graduate programs, two main sources of inquiry were utilized: the [NASPA graduate program list](#) and general outreach requests.

Invitations to share existing syllabi for courses on assessment within student affairs graduate programs were sent to various audience-specific listservs including ASSESS, SAAL, POD, CSPTalk, IASAS, and the WSCUC Assessment Leadership Academy alumni. In addition to listservs, social media posts on LinkedIn and X (formerly known as Twitter) invited anyone with a syllabus to share it with the research team.

To ensure fulsome data collection from programs and faculty that may not frequent such outlets, the institutional website was examined for each graduate program in the NASPA graduate program list. The website review included data collection from the graduate program and course catalog as to whether any student affairs programs included a course on assessment, whether it was required, when it was last taught, and the modality used. For any institution that offered a course on assessment, the graduate program coordinator and faculty, where known, were emailed directly, requesting a copy of the syllabus for inclusion in this study.

Across the two approaches of social outreach and direct contact, a total of 276 institutions with 396 graduate programs (including master, doctoral, and certificate) were reviewed. Note that several programs in the graduate directory were no longer active and some programs did not have a course specific to assessment. A total of 115 applicable syllabi were received from 101 institutions in alignment with the purposes of this research project.

Tables A1 through A3 provide additional contextual information regarding the syllabi, including region of institution, course level, and course modality. Some institutions offered multiple assessment courses for students in different programs (e.g., distinct courses for MEd and PhD students), whereas others provided the same course irrespective of student level. These tables should therefore be read as providing information at the syllabus/course level, rather than at the institutional level.

**Table A1. Distribution of Syllabi by Institutional Region**

Region (with state abbreviations)	Count of Syllabi in Region	% of Syllabi in Project
Far West (AK, CA, HI, NV, OR, WA)	5	4.3%
Great Lakes (IL, IN, MI, OH, WI)	17	14.8%
Mideast (DE, DC, MD, NJ, NY, PA)	15	13.0%
New England (CT, ME, MA, NH, RI, VT)	11	9.6%
Plains (IA, KS, MN, MO, NE, ND, SD)	11	9.6%
Rocky Mountains (CO, ID, MT, UT, WY)	6	5.2%
Southeast (AL, AR, FL, GA, KY, LA, MS, NC, SC, TN, VA, WV)	32	27.8%
Southwest (AZ, NM, OK, TX)	17	14.8%
No Institutional Affiliation	1	0.9%

*Note: Regional classifications reflect standard IPEDS categorizations.*

**Table A2. Distribution of Syllabi by Degree Track and Level**

Degree Track and Level	Count of Syllabi in Track	% of Syllabi in Project
Graduate (Both Masters- and Doctoral-level programs)	36	31.3%
MS	23	20.0%
MEd	23	20.0%
MA	14	12.2%
EdD	7	6.1%
Other (certificate, MPA, etc.)	7	6.1%
PhD	5	4.3%

*Note: Syllabi in the Graduate category offered the same course to students pursuing a degree across multiple tracks and/or levels.*

**Table A3. Distribution of Syllabi by Course Modality**

Row Labels	Count of Syllabi in Modality	% of Syllabi in Project
In-person	49	42.6%
Online	37	32.2%
Blended (or hybrid)	15	13.0%
Modality varies by semester	14	12.2%

*Note: Most programs submitted one syllabus per course. Classification of the course modality is therefore dependent on one representative syllabus unless the faculty member or program director provided additional context. It is likely that the modality of courses differs between semesters depending on instructors and program needs. This table should be therefore be read as a classification of the modality of syllabi in this project, rather than a general statement of how assessment courses are taught.*