

The Assessment Professional: Making a Difference in the 21st Century

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Our educational institutions have witnessed increased calls for accountability. How does one determine the degree to which these institutions are making a difference in their students' lives? Providing answers requires a special type of professional with expertise in assessment. This is a relatively new career option that is particularly well suited to individuals with interests and training in psychology. Assessment professionals combine state-of-the-art measurement and research skills with a strong understanding of human behavior, particularly in learning and development. The demands for individuals with these skills are very high, and there are numerous rewarding and well-paying jobs available.

WHEN I WAS A SENIOR PSYCHOLOGY undergraduate student back in the '70s, I faced a dilemma. I really liked psychology, and I desired to go to graduate school for advanced study, but in which field? I enjoyed a variety of substantive areas of psychology, but I wasn't strongly drawn to any particular one. I tried to resolve my dilemma by asking myself what I really liked in my studies. For starters, I really liked my quantitative methods courses; the statistics courses were interesting, my experimental psychology course gave valuable experience in the research process, and I was generally attracted to a data-based understanding of the world. But what was really interesting to me was the psychological measurement course I had taken. The process of developing reliable and valid measures, assessing the psychometric qualities of those measures, and interpreting test scores all were appealing to me. So,

imagine my delight at discovering that there were graduate programs that focused on measurement and statistics. I had now found graduate study that was well suited to my interests, and that in turn has led to a rewarding academic career in which I help improve measures of student learning while I teach courses in assessment, measurement, and statistics.

Does my dilemma sound familiar to you? Do you have an interest in quantitative methods—particularly in statistics or measurement (even if you might not admit it to your friends)? Then you should consider a career as an assessment professional. It's the career path I would have chosen had it existed when I was an undergraduate. My goal in this article is to help you discover this new, high-demand field for individuals interested in psychology, explain what assessment professionals do, and to help to determine whether it would be a good career choice for you.

What is Assessment?

Assessment is defined as the systematic basis for making inferences about the learning and development of students (Erwin, 1991). It seeks to understand and quantify the impact of educational programs by measuring what students know and can do. The overarching purpose of assessment is "to understand how educational programs are working and to determine whether they are contributing to student growth and development" (Palomba & Banta, 1999, p. 5). Assessment professionals provide expertise in gathering and interpreting such evidence through a strong combination of measurement, statistical, technological, and psychological skills.

What Do Assessment Professionals Do?

The tasks performed by assessment professionals are typically quite diverse,

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which I find quite appealing, as every day has its unique tasks and challenges. At its heart, the professional role requires a strong background in applied measurement and statistics. This implies that you would frequently be working with tests, rating scales, and other types of assessment instruments. This may involve a variety of test design activities; you might be studying the characteristics of test items, helping design scoring guides for essay tests or student performances, or helping faculty identify the most appropriate passing score for a given measure. Such activities require a strong background in classical and modern test theories.

In addition, assessment professionals frequently must use their research skills to choose assessment designs that will yield the most reliable and valid inferences possible about a particular program. Examples of the types of research questions we study include whether learning over the Internet is as effective as in-class instruction, or to what extent living in a dormitory enhances college student development. Understanding how students are impacted by a particular educational experience requires strong preparation in psychology and research design. A variety of research methods can be used (e.g., experimental, correlational, survey) by the assessment professional, and he or she must be able to make design choices that are effective, practical, and take into account an up-to-date understanding of student development and learning.

Assessment professionals, however, rarely do their jobs alone. They typically work with groups of individuals who are relatively unskilled in assessment and therefore need guidance and assistance. These individuals are often either content experts in the substantive area being assessed, decision makers who need to understand the assessment outcomes that you uncover, or people who deliver the educational program or service. The assessment professional therefore needs to have good communication skills, and must possess strong consultation and teaching skills as well. An understanding of psychology is a key to being successful in this role.

Would Assessment be a Good Career for You?

At this point, it might be useful for you to consider the activities you think you'd like to do professionally. As you read the above description regarding what assessment professionals do, could you project yourself into that role? Does

a job that entails working with data to improve outcomes people receive from educational programs and services sound attractive? Does the study of assessment-related research questions through the development of effective assessment designs seem rewarding to you? Do you find appealing the idea of helping a variety of other professionals and decision makers improve their programs by providing assessment expertise and assistance? Answering "yes" to these questions suggests that the field of assessment would provide a rewarding, stimulating career for you.

What is the Employment Outlook for Assessment Professionals?

There have been increased demands for accountability in many educational institutions, particularly regarding publicly funded colleges and universities. To address such demands, institutions have increasingly sought to demonstrate their value through credible empirical evidence of positive student outcomes. As a consequence, there has been an increasing demand for skilled professionals who can guide the assessment process.

This demand for assessment professionals has been well documented, as has the shortage of qualified individuals to meet the demand. Two surveys conducted by the National Council of Measurement in Education (NCME) in the 1990s (Brennan & Plake, 1990; Patelis, Kolen, & Parshall, 1997) indicated that while the number of students coming out of assessment-related graduate programs has remained fairly constant, potential employers of such students have reported a steady increase in the number of assessment positions needing to be filled. Currently, the demand exceeds the supply, and the demand promises to increase.

So, the employment future for assessment professionals is excellent. Many positions exist in a variety of settings, including K–12 education, colleges and universities, business and industry, testing organizations, health care organizations, consulting firms, and nonprofit organizations. These organizations need trained professionals with measurement, psychological, communication, and technological skills to help them assess program impact.

How Do I Become an Assessment Professional?

Becoming an assessment professional requires graduate training in either assessment or applied measurement and statistics. While there are some assess-

ment positions for which a master's degree would be suitable, most require a doctoral degree. There are a number of graduate programs that provide the type of training and experience you would need. Good sources of information about programs can be found in *Graduate Study in Psychology* (APA, 2001) or online at the NMCE website (www.ncme.org/careers). Look for programs that emphasize assessment and/or measurement, and that are oriented toward applied problems and issues.

Still Interested?

If I have achieved my purpose, I've helped you discover a career of which you probably weren't aware. It is a highly interesting, personally and professionally rewarding career that requires many of the skills and activities that attract people to study psychology—solving problems, measuring human behavior, working to help other professionals, and conducting empirical research.

If you want to know more about assessment, please feel free to contact me or check out the website of the Center for Assessment and Research Studies at James Madison University (www.jmu.edu/assessment). 

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