

## 2023 Assessment Focus Groups Report

### Statement on Report Draft Progress

Member checking is a process of validating qualitative research by presenting initial findings to members of the populations under study and receiving, then incorporating, feedback<sup>1</sup>. This draft report will be undergoing a member checking process during the Fall 2023 Professional Development Week, where themes will be presented and the full text of this report made available to a mixed group of faculty and administrators. Feedback will be solicited via an online form and incorporated into the final report.

### Introduction

In May 2023, a series of eleven focus groups was conducted by the Director of Assessment, Assessment and Evaluation Coordinator, and volunteer faculty and staff moderators from the College Assessment Task Force (CATF) to invite feedback from the campus community about assessment. Specifically, the researchers intended to learn about faculty and staff perceptions of and experiences with assessment in general, assessment technology, and assessment processes at the College.

The foundational research questions were:

1. How does the College ensure that assessment leads to improvements in teaching and learning or unit outcomes, i.e., how do we systematically ensure that loops are closed?
2. How can we ensure that assessment is relevant to students, faculty and staff?
3. What technology tool(s) will best serve the current and future assessment needs at the College?

The focus group methodology was used to gain deeper insight into and input from assessment “end users” after a faculty-wide survey on assessment conducted by Institutional Research in Fall 2022, and an open forum on assessment technology conducted by the Office of Assessment and Evaluation in January 2023.

### Population and Sample Strategy

The population researched was all of the faculty and administrative staff who participate in assessment, which totaled 854 people. All members of each population segment (excluding those who specifically opted out or who were part of this project) were emailed an invitation via Qualtrics, from which they registered for a scheduled focus group session or indicated that they were interested in being contacted but were unavailable at the scheduled times. The pool of people who were unavailable for scheduled focus group sessions was invited to a final focus group session that consisted of members from several different segments; the themes from that session’s data have been used in overall population analysis but were excluded from any analysis of specific population segments.

The population was divided into the following groups for the purposes of data collection and analysis:

	# of participants*
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<sup>1</sup> Danner, Mona J. E., et al. Using Focus Groups to Listen, Learn, and Lead in Higher Education, Stylus Publishing, LLC, 2018. ProQuest Ebook Central, <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/ccphiladelphia/detail.action?docID=5487752>.

Administrative/Non-Teaching Faculty and Staff	14
Business and Technology Division Full-Time Faculty	2
Department Heads and Program Coordinators	11
Liberal Studies Division Full-Time Faculty	16
Math, Science, and Health Careers Division Full-Time Faculty	4
Part-Time Faculty	10
*Some participants hold more than one role at the College; they are recorded here based on the focus group segment they attended, i.e., this count is non-duplicative.	

## Moderators

In addition to the Director of Assessment and the Assessment and Evaluation Coordinator, four additional volunteers from the College Assessment Task Force (three full-time faculty and the Director of Institutional Research) helped to facilitate some focus group sessions. All moderators were trained in focus group techniques and methods and were assigned to moderate sessions for a population segment different from their own.

## Thematic Analysis

### Overall

#### *Diversity*

One of the most striking features of the collected responses of all participants is the breadth of experiences, opinions, and desires regarding assessment. Participants tended to differ just as much within segments as between them, though there were some detectable patterns in some areas. There will not be a single solution to nearly any assessment problem; rather, most challenges in assessment at the College will need multiple simultaneous solutions to be successfully resolved. Overall patterns and themes do exist, but in order to implement new initiatives, several different (and possibly contradictory) positions must be considered.

#### *Value and Transparency*

A consistent theme throughout the focus group discussions was the need for transparency. The College employs many different and layered forms of assessment, and it is unclear to many what the purpose of specific assessment activities is, and how they relate to each other. Communication that is intended to flow through the “chain of command” does not consistently reach all levels.

Participants in several different segments highlighted that, while they understood the value of assessment in theory, they did not see evidence of assessment efforts being valued, either by supervisors or by the College culture overall. All steps of an assessment cycle take time and effort, especially the final stages of analysis, reflection, and implementing change plans; to justify the investment of time and effort by both faculty and staff, the specific purpose, overall plan, and value of each of these stages must be clearly articulated by both direct supervisors and higher-level College administrators. Finally, when assessment data are collected and aggregated, the results of that aggregation and analysis should be shared with all of the people who contributed to the aggregation, so that the purpose of assessment efforts is not only stated but also demonstrated. The sentiment that “everything [i.e., data and reports] goes up [the reporting structure], but nothing [i.e., information,

results, and context] comes down” was expressed in several focus group sessions across multiple segments.

### *Mission-Driven*

A third consistent theme, visible throughout all segments and nearly all areas of discussion, is the importance placed on serving students well. While many different perspectives were offered as to the exact mechanisms or processes to do so, faculty at all levels and administrators prioritize students’ satisfaction, progress and wellbeing. The overall goal of improving the student experience at CCP, and creatively leveraging any available resources and processes to do so, is clearly a guiding principle that cuts across divisions and hierarchy. Many of the frustrations that were voiced by participants were based on perceived barriers to delivering the best possible education to students.

### *Roles Are Not Well Defined*

Though participants were not explicitly asked about the roles of various offices, groups, and teams in assessment processes at the College, it became clear that these were unclear to many outside of these units. One example was the characterization by one full-time faculty member of student course evaluations as something “you all [presumably the Office of Assessment and Evaluation or upper administration] make us do,” despite those evaluations being administered entirely within the Division of Academic and Student Success. Administrators discussed the performance review process, despite that process being under the aegis of Human Resources. Different roles, such as the DCAF, OAE, academic deans, and department chairs, were frequently conflated, and the origination points of specific processes and policies were unclear to many participants outside of these structures. This may indicate both a need to more clearly define these roles for an outside audience and the necessity of better coordination between the various positions involved in assessment, since inconsistencies and redundancies may often be attributed to the same source, contributing to participants’ frustrations and confusion.

## **Experiences with Assessment**

### *Position Matters*

Understandings of assessment and personally articulated purposes for assessment varied widely, not between all segments, but between different positions at the College. Department heads and program coordinators primarily view assessment as a tool for determining the cohesion and effectiveness of program curricula and pedagogical choices, whereas full-time faculty who do not also hold these administrative roles view assessment as primarily a tool for improving their individual teaching practices. Adjunct faculty reported feeling very much outside of the assessment conversation, either being asked only to report specific quantitative data or not being included in assessment processes at all. Administrators said that they view assessment as primarily a means of unit performance improvement, but also that they would like to use it as an opportunity to communicate the value of their work with outside stakeholders and to justify resource allocation requests.

### *Desire for Cross-Pollination*

Participants across segments observed that, while assessment for improving ones’ own teaching or unit performance is important, the more valuable learning opportunities presented by assessment processes

lay in the act of discussion with colleagues, both within their immediate area and across departments, divisions, and even roles at the College. Several faculty participants voiced desires for more opportunities to discuss assessment results at length with colleagues and to learn more about activities outside of their immediate area. They highlighted the creative potential of teaching circles, and of discussion groups composed of faculty from diverse fields sharing action plans and pedagogical strategies.

### *Desire for Depth*

A number of participants voiced cynicism about the purpose of assessment, characterizing it as a tedious reporting process done for the purposes of satisfying either upper-level College administrators or its accreditors. Participants articulated a difference between assessment *qua* assessment and assessment as it is done at the College, the latter being superficial and *pro forma* while the former is a more organic process of observation and modification. Inconsistencies in the assessment cycle schedules and conflicting reporting schedules (e.g., being asked for assessment analysis and reporting during the same period that final grades are due, or being asked for reports and reflections with little time before the due date) contributed to the feeling that, though many participants would like to derive more insight from assessment processes and data, they did not feel that they have the time or support needed to reflect deeply, leading to repeated cycles of superficial reporting.

## **Desires and Plans for Assessment**

### *Seeing the Bigger Picture*

When asked to describe what they would like to learn from assessment processes, many participants voiced an interest in understanding how their work, assessment data, and reporting fit into a “bigger picture” of the College as a whole. Some faculty wanted the ability to access student learning assessment data at a more granular level in order to analyze it more deeply, while others hoped that a wider lens would provide more insights or reveal potentially counterintuitive or subtle patterns. To that end, faculty from several different disciplines wished for assessment practices that included more space for qualitative data discussions and adding context to quantitative assessment data. Administrators also wanted to know about larger trends outside of their own offices, i.e., how their work, in contributing to the success of the College, makes an impact on the city of Philadelphia, and how changes to city trends and policies impact their work in turn. Administrators expressed interest in how assessment cycles and reporting might create opportunities to communicate their successes to the larger campus community, and likewise, that they would like more opportunities to learn about their colleagues’ challenges and successes in assessment.

### *Improving Teaching and Unit Performance*

Both faculty and administrators indicated that a primary purpose of assessment, for them, is professional improvement. Assessment is seen as a method for determining the strengths and weaknesses of both individuals and groups, and the effectiveness of coordination between them. Teaching faculty were consistent in listing personal growth and teaching improvement as a primary purpose for assessment. Department Heads, Program Coordinators, administrative unit leaders, and participants who had served in these capacities previously all discussed using assessment as a tool to determine the effectiveness of program/curriculum/unit performance overall and to improve cohesion.

One faculty member described assessment as “like having a teaching circle with myself;” the connections between assessment and teaching circles arose several times across different faculty groups. Participants in nearly every segment expressed a desire to hear about other colleagues’ successes with assessment, both within and across disciplines, more often and to learn from peers.

- “Assessment helps to keep course material fresh and relevant to what is happening now in your industry. It is always great to know that what you set out to give students is what they are taking away from the program. It serves as a way to validate to employers or other schools that students are ready for those next challenges in learning and/or professional environments.”
- “Assessment is critical to meeting the goals for my unit. It measures the impact my office is making to the College and our community. It communicates the value of the work that I/we do. It provides important information for me to relay to partners, both internally and externally so that we can all better work together. Most importantly, it shares how students are benefiting from our work and how we can continue to improve our efforts for the continuous benefit of our students and community.”
- “Assessment allows us to see the big picture in the daily work that we do. Too often, we get caught up in the day-to-day tasks that we lose sight of how that work provides us with the footing that gets us to our goals. The data that we collect and assess bridges that gap. It also allows us to see the areas in which we are doing well. It shifts the focus from what we are lacking and onto what we can celebrate.”

#### *Support Is Needed and Appreciated*

Nearly every participant expressed that greater support is needed for assessment activities. The specific types of support defined ranged from direct monetary or release/extended time compensation for completing assessment activities, to facilitated meetings with colleagues about assessment data and practices, to upgrading College equipment such as Scantron machines used in assessment data collection. Across all segments, participants expressed an understanding that good assessment takes a significant amount of time and effort in order to reflect on data thoroughly and implement related improvements, coupled with frustration that they find it difficult to justify setting aside an appropriate amount of time to do so given the demands of their workloads.

When asked who they turn to for help with assessment, faculty participants across all divisions were effusive in their appreciation for the DCAF team, describing their personalized and discipline-relevant resources and modifications as a relief to frustrations felt by many. The video tutorials and instructional guides produced by the DCAF teams were cited frequently as part of faculty members’ routine assessment processes. Participants in many areas expressed a desire for more readily available resource materials, professional development in areas of assessment, and for assistance from assessment “experts,” or from colleagues with more experience in assessment. In contrast, some participants also said that they felt that a surfeit of time is dedicated to “hand-holding” and training, possibly indicating that assessment processes themselves should be revised if they are so consistently unclear to those meant to be completing them.

#### **Assessment Technology and Processes**

##### *Frustration with Frequent Change, Perceived Inconsistency*

Many participants expressed cynicism about the actual value of assessment to their supervisors and to the College overall, citing as evidence the frequency of changes to assessment systems and processes. Participants felt that some of these changes, like last-minute requests for new types of assessment reports in order to satisfy documentation needs for the Middle States self-study, indicated a lack of overarching meaning or coordination of assessment efforts, or a lack of seriousness on this topic stemming from College leadership. The selection and implementation of the current assessment management system, AEFIS, was cited as another area of inconsistency – the selection criteria and process were perceived as opaque, and the need for change from previous assessment reporting methods was not adequately articulated. While assessment processes should themselves be assessed and updated in keeping with College needs and best practices, the reasoning for these changes should be broadly communicated to all constituents affected by them in the interest of transparency and professionalism.

#### *Desire for Clear, Regular, Consistent, and Positive Communication About Assessment*

All participants were asked directly about their preferences for communication about assessment expectations, a question which elicited perhaps the widest range of responses of the entire series. While many faculty and administrators said that email is their preferred mode of communication about assessment, several also specified that they significantly prefer personalized emails from individuals that they know over CNEWS or other types of large email blasts. A few faculty members emphatically said that they absolutely did not want to receive email about assessment, and that they responded best to invitations and conversations held in person. Participants in several different groups raised the possibility for a College-wide Canvas shell or other easily accessible ‘hub’ for assessment-related resources and support, including calendars and reminders to complete reporting activities.

One very consistent call across all groups was for communication that is clear, consistent and timely. Participants found it frustrating and disruptive to receive communications about assessment during the busiest times of the academic year, often asking for data or analysis on a very short timeline. People in several different groups requested more frequent previews and overviews, explaining all of the assessment activities that would be required of them over the course of the entire semester or academic year and including examples of acceptable submissions. Some faculty also noted that discussions of assessment data during PD Week, while informative, take place too close to the beginning of the semester for substantive change to be enacted as a result of the assessment data.

Finally, as discussed previously, several participants noted that assessment is often discussed in a negative or punitive tone, focusing largely on problems, challenges, and failures to meet benchmarks. This contributes to the general sense that assessment is tedious and unpleasant. Participants wished for more opportunities to discuss assessment successes and best practices, and to use assessment data to highlight accomplishments and challenges overcome.

#### *The Best Assessment Technology Is One That Works*

Frustration for and cynicism around the AEFIS assessment management software was widespread but not universal. Some faculty members expressed satisfaction with their overall experiences with AEFIS and appreciation for the opportunity to critically reflect on the connections between their Course Learning Outcomes and the program curriculum. Many participants in the focus group series, however, described a wide range of negative experiences with the AEFIS software, from a confusing user interface

and lack of technical support, to inaccurate and at times misleading data analysis, to the time spent repeating the process of linking every semester. Faculty in several divisions indicated that the process of implementing AEFIS required them to alter their course design and assessment methods to suit the limited range of types of data that the software could use for analysis. These frustrations seem to have either heightened or become conflated with the overarching concept of assessment itself, greatly amplifying cynicism about the genuine importance of assessment at the institution. In discussing the difficulty of finding sufficient time for genuine reflection on assessment data, several participants cited AEFIS as a time sink and a distraction from the “real” work of assessment.

Participants across all groups expressed a strong desire for assessment reporting software that works well without requiring significant user interventions or departure from their other workflows. Many participants expressed some frustration that assessment at the college seems to be very quantitative-, report-, and software-driven, rather than being truly driven by data or by the needs of students and faculty. The sentiment that assessment software should largely fade into the background, aside from data analysis output and storage, while supporting and emphasizing personal conversations, observations, and interaction appeared to be widespread.

- “I try to minimize my contact with AEFIS as much as possible.”
- “Before AEFIS, there was a desire to know what students are learning but not to put in time to design or plan. One good thing about AEFIS is that it forced us to have these conversations.”
- “AEFIS helped me with assessment. It is minimal work to link to AEFIS if what you’re teaching is really accurately linked, and at least it’s easier than doing it all by hand.”
- “AEFIS drove me nuts. I had to go through the linking process multiple times. I like what we’re using now; the Excel sheet doesn’t let you mess it up.”
- “There is nothing to like about AEFIS. It’s not news.”
- [The ideal assessment technology is] “anything that’s going to get us what we need, I’m fine with pen and paper, I’m fine with oral exams, I’m fine with academic research – the important question is ‘can you get data that’s quality data and will be useful for the different things you need to use it for?’”

## Conclusions and Recommendations

### Shared Definition of Assessment

Assessment is a constant, iterative process of measurably defining, recording observations and data on, and analyzing the outcomes of activities across every area of the College for the purpose of continuous improvement, on both the individual and systematic levels. It is reported at the initiative, course, program, department, administrative unit, division, and institutional levels on a repeated, cyclical basis.

### Recommendations

#### Overall

##### *Culture Shift*

Specific strategies and plans for communications will be detailed in the recommendations that follow, but one clear overarching need is for the value of assessment to be clearly communicated, in both words and actions, by college leadership at all levels. If the College values assessment, from top down,

that should be more clearly felt by those asked to complete assessment tasks. If assessment is valued, support and resources should follow. Clarity of communication and consistency between words and actions cannot be only aspirations; they are essential to improving the assessment atmosphere and foundational to implementing the recommendations to follow.

**How does the College ensure that assessment leads to improvements in teaching and learning or unit outcomes, i.e., how do we systematically ensure that loops are closed?**

*College Assessment Handbook*

In response to the need for more readily available assessment resources, the Office of Assessment and Evaluation is coordinating the production of an assessment handbook, with major portions to be completed by members of the DCAF team and others from the College Assessment Task Force. This should include:

- Overviews of all assessment activities and their relationships to one another, spotlighting links to improving the student experience at all points in the process.
- The specific purpose and value of each assessment activity or stage in a larger assessment cycle
- A college-wide assessment timeline, including assessment cycle schedules for all divisions, programs, and units, and also clear timelines for when assessment coordinators (the DCAF team for academic faculty, the Office of Assessment and Evaluation for administrative assessment) will provide data, feedback, and other communications.
- An “assessment yearbook” indicating what roles at the College are most closely tied to each assessment activity and how to contact those people.
- Examples of best practices and acceptable submissions for all assessment reporting activities.

In order to remain relevant, this handbook will need to be updated regularly, disseminated widely, and consistently referenced and adhered to by college leadership and assessment coordinators.

*Assessment Resource Hub*

One easily accessible and centrally located digital location for faculty and staff to access assessment information should be built, populated, and routinely updated. This should include all of the information presented in the College Assessment Handbook, including timelines updated in real time, plus links to additional digital resources and direct links to accessible data and to report submission processes. It could be built on the College’s website, in a Canvas shell, or within the college’s assessment management software if that is a supported function of the platform. Ideally, this would be a tool that any participant in assessment processes could customize to suit their needs and preferences individually, but that would depend heavily on the technological platform selected.

**How can we ensure that assessment is relevant to students, faculty, and staff?**

*Multi-point Communication Strategy*

Assessment information, including timelines, reporting requirements, best practices, and aggregations of assessment data, must be communicated in multiple ways to meet the needs of diverse audiences. These should include, but not be limited to: CNEWS, personal/personalized emails, the aforementioned assessment handbook and resource hub, presentations during PD week, visits to department and division meetings by assessment coordinators, and physical media. Communication should always



highlight the purpose of assessment activities and the connections between assessment and improvements to the student experience. Any time assessment data are requested or aggregated, the results of that aggregation and analysis should be shared with all of the people who contributed to the aggregation.

**What technology tool(s) will best serve the current and future assessment needs at the College?**

*Platform Review*

When the CATF's Platform Review Team reviews submissions following the Assessment Management Software RFP, it should prioritize the qualities that have consistently emerged as most important to assessment end-users, based on data from this focus group series, the Fall 2022 Assessment Survey, and the January 2023 Assessment Technology Luncheon. Those include:

- Ease of use
- Smooth integration with existing practices and methods
- Flexibility
- Accuracy

During the selection process, the Platform Review Team should be as timely, communicative, and transparent as possible. When a platform has been selected, the reasons for that choice should also be communicated broadly. If the Platform Review Team ultimately selects a new software platform for assessment management, the implementation process should be transparent and respectful of faculty and staff's time and needs.

## Appendix

### Moderator's Guide: 2023 Assessment Focus Group

#### I. Introduction (five minutes)

- A. The purpose of this focus group is to learn about faculty and staff perceptions of and experiences with assessment in general, assessment technology, and assessment processes at CCP. Data will be used to inform CATF recommendations for assessment technology and to create a shared definition of assessment for the College overall.
- B. Moderator introductions: "My name is \_\_\_\_\_ and this is \_\_\_\_\_. Our job is to facilitate your discussion, record your responses, and keep time to make sure that we thoroughly cover ALL of the topics."
- C. Group Guidelines
  - 1. Moderators should speak less than one-third of the time.
  - 2. While one moderator facilitates the discussion the other will be taking notes for analysis, BUT NO NAMES will be recorded.
  - 3. Respect the confidentiality of each participant by not quoting or attributing comments to anyone outside of the group.
  - 4. All should participate.
  - 5. Discussion and disagreement are encouraged; no need to reach consensus.
  - 6. There are no right or wrong opinions; just different points of view.
  - 7. Only one person should speak at a time—no side conversations.
  - 8. Please be open and honest about your attitudes, opinions, and experiences—we want to hear it all.
- D. Audio recording for data analyses
  - 1. ONLY the focus group team will have access to the recordings.
  - 2. The recordings will be used ONLY for data analyses.
  - 3. ONLY group results will be reported and no individuals will be identified; however, we may use some direct quotations to emphasize a particular point.
  - 4. Confidentiality: Please keep confidential all information that others share with the group when you leave
- E. "If there are no questions or concerns, let's begin!"

#### II. Introduction of Participants (10 minutes)

- A. First name, department, and role

#### III. Warm-up question related to the topic—make sure everyone responds to this item. Collect cards prior to starting the topic discussion. On Zoom, have participants do a **chat blast**.

- 1. If you could wave a magic wand and design an assessment system/cycle/plan exactly like you wanted, what would it look like? [Participants write their responses on a card **or in the chat**, and the co-moderator facilitates a discussion.]

#### IV. Topic Discussion (60–90 minutes)

- A. Experiences with Assessment
  - 1. At CCP, we conduct assessment at the course, program, unit (for AES), and institutional levels. What comes to mind when you think of each of these levels?
    - a. What are your colleagues' perceptions about assessment at CCP?

- b. To what extent do you think most faculty[administrators/staff] (i.e., non-department heads and program coordinators) participate in program-level assessment?
    2. What is the purpose of assessment for you?
    3. What is the most difficult aspect of assessment, in your opinion?
      - a. When you need help with assessment, who do you contact?
    4. How do you get data for assessment? How do you collect it, and how do you retrieve it?
      - a. When it is time to make meaning of assessment results, what is your process?
      - b. How does your department or unit go about data analysis? What are discussions about data like in your area?
- B. Desires and Plans for Assessment
  1. What do you want to get out of, or learn from the assessment process?
  2. What supports do you need to make assessment and assessment results more helpful for you and for your students?
  3. What does the phrase “Closing the Loop” mean to you?
    - a. Have you made any changes in your teaching[processes] in the last few years? Think of one specific example.
    - b. Why did you make that change? Did you document it? With whom did you share the documentation? Have you reassessed the situation to find out if the change had its intended effect?
  4. How do we ensure that assessment leads to improvements in teaching and learning (or unit outcomes)? How can we ensure that assessment is relevant to students?
- C. Assessment Technology and Processes
  1. How would you prefer to receive communication re: assessment expectations?
  2. AEFIS (Assessment, Evaluation, Feedback & Intervention System) is the primary assessment platform that CCP has been using for the last 3 years. Have you used it, and what are your experiences?
    - a. How do your experiences with AEFIS compare with experiences you may have of other forms of assessment technology?
  3. What is the extent of the need for assistance with the design of assignments/rubrics & alignment with CLOs [with the design of assessment instruments or other data-gathering tools & alignment with Strategic Plan pillars and Divisional Goals]?
  4. What is the ideal assessment technology?
- V. **Wrap-up (10–15 minutes):** Make sure everyone responds to this item. On Zoom, have participants do a **chat blast**.
  1. How will assessment help you meet your goals for teaching and learning/your unit/your program? [Participants write their responses on a card and the co-moderator facilitates a discussion if there is time. If there is not time for discussion, the co-moderator collects the cards and ends the session.]