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## From Campus to Corporation: Using Developmental Assessment Centers to Facilitate Students' Next Career Steps

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# From Campus to Corporation: Using Developmental Assessment Centers to Facilitate Students' Next Career Steps

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## INTRODUCTION

For the things we have to learn before we can do them, we learn by doing them.

—Aristotle, *The Nicomachean Ethics*

Honors graduates have much to learn when transitioning into their first position after college. For instance, workplaces have an entirely different culture and set of expectations from undergraduate honors classrooms (Wendlandt & Rochlen). Furthermore, the skills they need to become successful employees or graduate students are different from those required of successful honors college students, with a greater emphasis on communication skills (Stevens) as one example.

Honors students are bright, curious, and hard-working (Achterberg), and honors programs give them the opportunity to foster accelerated academic success and access to extensive resources. Although honors programs are extremely beneficial to students intellectually and academically, many honors students graduate without adequate knowledge of the skills and capabilities that they are expected to have in the workplace. Thus, these recent graduates are often intellectually but not organizationally prepared.

At the Pennsylvania State University's Schreyer Honors College, we have found a way to mitigate this gap in skills and understanding by operating an assessment center, a work simulation program designed to allow students to experience organizational life while also receiving crucial feedback from those with experience in the workforce. The value of assessment centers lies in enhancing scholars' educational and career development, and successful implementation requires important considerations, processes, and resources. The detailed story of Schreyer Honors College's Leadership Assessment Center elaborates on the factors that have been crucial to the team's success in providing this opportunity to Penn State's honors students over the past ten years and might inspire other academic institutions to consider creating assessment centers for their scholars' education.

Although the Assessment Center's enhanced educational experience for honors college students is its primary goal, the benefits extend to all involved in the center, including graduate students, alumni, and the undergraduate students and faculty who serve as administrators for the center. A successful assessment center can also benefit the college itself as a tool for recruiting future students. As a former dean of Schreyer pointed out early on, "This gives me an edge when talking to prospective parents and students who are considering Penn State versus other institutions. The progressive nature of our overall program is enhanced by offering unique opportunities like the assessment center."

## **DEFINING AND DIFFERENTIATING WORKPLACE SUCCESS: BARTRAM'S GREAT EIGHT COMPETENCIES**

Delineating the skills and abilities that lead to workplace success is essential to knowing what we need to teach our students. Fortunately, work-oriented psychologists, or industrial/organizational (IO) psychologists, have been addressing questions specific to workplace skills for some time. That knowledge base has culminated in numerous taxonomies of what it takes

to achieve effective workplace performance. In the world of IO psychology, these lists are known as competency models.

In the early 2000s, IO psychologist Dave Bartram began examining organizations' workplace competency models to look for common themes. Although researchers and theorists initially thought of leadership ability as a trait, or something that is stable and difficult to change in a person, time brought realizations that other factors crucially affect one's ability to lead (Lord et al.). In short, researchers realized that people can work on their leadership skills to improve their organizational effectiveness. Many organizations began to develop lists not only of characteristics required by leaders but, more importantly, the behaviors that leaders engage in that make them effective. Although organizations often create unique sets of competencies, Bartram recognized similarities and themes across organizational models, which eventually culminated in the Great Eight competency model. The competency names and definitions of the Great Eight workplace competencies can be found in Table 1.

Bartram's work is especially useful for honors students transitioning into the workplace for several reasons. First, it was derived scientifically and is held in high esteem. In consultation with our colleagues in IO psychology regarding the most useful competency model for honors students, one consistent piece of feedback was the suggestion to use the Great Eight, in large part because it was developed through sound scientific methods. Second, the Great Eight is broad and captures the many attributes representing the essence of workplace performance, an important consideration for advanced honors students given the wide array of leadership positions they may encounter in their future careers. Although corporations often use competency models that are specific to the demands of specific jobs, honors scholars require a model that captures the essence of leadership effectiveness across a variety of industries. Third, Bartram's competency model is not proprietary and was not developed for an existing organization, so anyone can use it without ownership considerations. Finally, as honors students span many schools and programs within a university setting, a general competency model is better than one created for honors scholars or one academic college.

Research suggests that employers' expectations regarding these general competencies are not being met by students transitioning into the workforce. Most prominently, many employers state that recent college graduates lack both oral and written communication skills (e.g., Stevens) despite a heavy emphasis placed on such skills in the workplace (National Association of

**TABLE 1. NAMES AND DEFINITIONS OF THE GREAT EIGHT COMPETENCIES (BARTRAM, 2005)**

Factor	Competency Domain	Definition of Competency Domain	Hypothesized Big Five, Motivation, and Ability Relationships
1	Leading & Deciding	Taking control, exercising leadership, initiating action, giving direction, and taking responsibility	Need for power and control, extraversion
2	Supporting & Cooperating	Supporting others, showing respect and positive regard in social situations, putting people first, working effectively with individuals and teams, clients, and staff, and behaving consistently with clear personal values that complement those of the organization	Agreeableness
3	Interacting & Presenting	Communicating and networking effectively, successfully persuading and influencing others, relating to others in a confident, relaxed manner	Extraversion, general mental ability
4	Analyzing & Interpreting	Showing evidence of clear analytical thinking, getting to the heart of complex problems and issues, applying own expertise effectively, taking on new technology, and communicating well in writing	General mental ability, openness to new experience
5	Creating & Conceptualizing	Working well in situations requiring openness to new ideas and experiences, seeking out learning opportunities, handling situations and problems with innovation and creativity, thinking broadly and strategically, and supporting and driving organizational change	General mental ability, openness to new experience
6	Organizing & Executing	Planning ahead and working in a systematic and organized way, following directions and procedures, focusing on customer satisfaction, and delivering a quality service or product to the agreed standards	Conscientiousness, general mental ability

7	Adapting & Coping	Adapting and responding well to change, managing pressure effectively, and coping well with setbacks	Emotional stability
8	Enterprising & Performing	Focusing on results and achieving personal work objectives, showing an understanding of business, commerce, and finance, and seeking opportunities for self-development and career advancement	Need for achievement, negative agreeableness

Colleges and Employers). What is more, Wendlandt and Rochlen report gaps in expected levels of experience and other skills for recent graduates and feelings of culture shock upon leaving college. These differences in expectations lead to disappointment for both recent graduates and employers. Assessment centers are one potential solution for shrinking gaps in both skills and expectations for college students and employers.

## AN INTRODUCTION AND GUIDE TO ASSESSMENT CENTERS

Preparing students for the transition into working life requires understanding their current skill level and giving them a plan of action for developing areas of weakness and effectively using their strengths. IO psychologists, trained in assessing the skills of potential employees, have developed a program that not only helps determine areas of strength and development but also gives students exposure to typical organizational culture through work simulations called *assessment centers*.

Thornton & Rupp define assessment centers as “a procedure used by human resource management (HRM) to evaluate and develop personnel in terms of attributes or abilities relevant to organizational effectiveness” (1). Many organizations use assessment centers for purposes that include spy selection in the military, supervisor promotions in public safety organizations, and identifying managers and executives in private industry (Thornton & Gibbons). In addition to finding and selecting people who will likely perform well in leadership positions, assessment centers can help provide a developmental roadmap by identifying strengths and areas that need improvement (Spychalski et al.). The underlying framework of an assessment center is the competency model, making it a direct way to understand a person’s level of ability in each competency.

Assessment centers seek to recreate a typical workday by including activities characteristic of an office environment, e.g., presentations, meetings, and email. These activities, or *exercises*, provide samples of work from which observers can evaluate participant performance in terms of quality and effectiveness. Someone who performs well on such exercises is likely to perform well in a job that requires similar activities, and someone who struggles in such situations would likely have difficulties. In addition, assessment centers often require participants to complete personality inventories, take various ability tests, and respond to interview questions that signal future work performance. People who score higher on such measures are likely to perform well in the workplace while those who score lower are not.

Since the early 1960s, research from the field of IO psychology has shown that assessment centers can serve as excellent vehicles for identifying the strengths and developmental opportunities of their participants (Thornton & Rupp). For organizations that implement assessment centers, the process has proven to be an important tool in understanding, developing, and managing talent (Sackett, Shewach, & Keiser). Assessments centers have numerous benefits to organizations and offer great potential to the world of higher education.

In assessment centers, activities put participants in the shoes of typical organizational members at work by assigning tasks such as giving presentations, conducting one-on-one and small-group meetings, and producing written correspondence. The end result of an assessment center, when used for developmental purposes, is feedback in the form of scores reflecting the participants' strengths and weaknesses as well as specific and detailed qualitative feedback that highlights particularly effective and ineffective behaviors leading to each of those scores. Participants leave the program not only with a glimpse into the realities of the working world and an idea of their strengths and weaknesses but also specific and actionable behaviors they can improve and a comprehensive developmental plan for moving forward.

For these reasons, two of us, Jacobs and Loviscky, decided to design and implement an assessment center for the students of Schreyer Honors College at Penn State. As the Leadership Assessment Center celebrates its tenth year, we can say that the project has experienced overwhelming success, so much so that we have expanded the operation to other areas of our school, building an assessment process for graduate students in the Huck Life Sciences Institute as well as expanding to other universities such as Bryn Mawr College and Northeastern University.

## **ASSESSMENT CENTERS FOR EVERYONE: BUILDING ASSESSMENT CENTERS IN DIFFERENT CONTEXTS**

Before detailing how we have come to run a successful and well-regarded assessment center in our honors college, we hope to turn the reader's attention to the variability in what a successful assessment center might look like. All share two basic components: (1) work simulations in which participant performance is evaluated on several competencies, culminating in feedback designed to help participants develop their level of competence, and (2) fictitious organizations and scenarios based on either the Great Eight



competencies or a parallel competency model. We touch on four examples of assessment centers that we have built, showcasing the adaptability of the assessment center model.

## **Penn State Schreyer Honors College**

We start with our first project, the Schreyer Honors College Leadership Assessment Center, which is the most traditional of all of them. The assessment takes place during an eight-hour span of time during which twelve honors students are assessed by 28 graduate students and professionals on Bartram's Great Eight competencies. Our first assessment center may have been the most challenging simply because we were starting from scratch, and it required just as much if not more resources than any of our subsequent centers. However, the opportunity to first build a traditional assessment center and run it was enough to better understand where we could change and adapt it to ensure the success of subsequent centers.

The circumstances of building this assessment center were ideal. We had access to the perfect space, which included individual offices for each of our participants and assessors; we had leaders experienced with assessment centers in both research and practice; and we had a group of enthusiastic graduate students to help create the materials. One of the most important lessons we have learned since building the Schreyer Honors College Leadership Assessment Center, though, is that there are many more ways to build and run an assessment center.

## **Northeastern University**

The second leadership assessment center build began in 2013 for the International Business program at Northeastern University in Boston. Self-described as a global, experiential, research university, Northeastern aims to give students real-world experiences and strives for global impact through the university's research focus and through students' co-ops and semesters abroad. Given the program's international business and leadership emphasis, we worked with Northeastern to build an assessment center that was tailored to assess abilities associated with global leadership. We used the expertise of Allen Bird, who spearheaded the project, along with critical incident reports written by international business students to create and develop exercises. In line with the international business focus, we mapped Bartram's Great Eight leadership competencies onto the global leadership competencies created by

Northeastern’s international business program, culminating in the Assessment Center for Global Effectiveness, or “Global ACE” for Northeastern.

We also adapted the assessment center to accommodate a larger number of students by migrating the paper-based rater guidelines and rating forms onto Qualtrics surveys that could be filled out electronically by assessors for every participant. Seeing the benefits of using more technology-based methods helped inspire the sophisticated online process we have today at the Penn State assessment center using Google Docs and Google Sheets.

## **Bryn Mawr College**

Our third leadership assessment center was developed in conjunction with Bryn Mawr College and began in the fall of 2014. Bryn Mawr was another special case since it is an all-women’s college with a focus on social justice and creation of supportive environments. Bryn Mawr’s program is run by Katie Krimmel, who serves as associate dean of the Leadership, Innovation and the Liberal Arts Center (LILAC). The assessment center is known as the Leadership Learning Laboratory or “L<sup>3</sup>,” and it has been an important addition to the process of leadership development on that campus.

The competency modeling component was particularly interesting in this case because Bryn Mawr had put a lot of work into developing their own competency model in the previous year. Their model included reflective practice, social responsibility, and cultural competence—competencies not typically found in the world of assessment centers. To accommodate the client, we reviewed the literature for relevant academic support and used their conceptual definitions to create behavioral ones.

Another challenge at Bryn Mawr was accessing a suitable personality assessment tool. In our in-house center, we use the WAVE from Saville Consulting, a personality-based self-assessment tool, to supplement the in-person assessment, and we advise our clients to do likewise as much as possible. As the WAVE was over budget, we directed Bryn Mawr to the IPIP, which is a free but well-validated personality assessment tool. The Bryn Mawr assessment center has now been running for four years, and we often hear of their continued success and excitement about the assessment center from their team.

## **Penn State Huck Life Sciences Institute**

The context of our most recent build was especially unique. The Huck Life Sciences Institute at Penn State prepares world-class, graduate-level scholars

with extensive expertise in their chosen scientific disciplines; however, the Huck leadership recognized that some of their graduate students were not as proficient at communicating and presenting their research, a necessary skill for those going on the job market. To develop their students into successful scholars and practitioners, leaders in the program reached out to our team to create a process whereby students could develop practical organizational skills before leaving the university to obtain academic or applied jobs.

Although the Great Eight was a close fit for the needs of the Huck assessment center, interviews with professors, current students, recent graduates, and human resources professionals at organizations that hire Huck graduates suggested the need for minor adaptations to the model. With those adaptations in place, the main challenge of the Huck assessment center was to fit it into the time needs of the graduate students, which did not allow for a full day of work simulation. To accommodate their busy schedules, we reformatted the assessment center from a full day of assessments with twelve participants to one two-hour session with a single participant. Further, we encouraged participants to use materials with which they were already familiar. For example, we encouraged students to use a presentation that they had already made for a class or lab and adapt it to fit the context of our assessment process, a mixed-audience conference. Overall, we have received positive feedback from both the students who have completed the assessment and the faculty leadership within Huck. We have now completed the fourth year at Huck.

## **Penn State Psychology of Leadership Master's Program**

Currently in the works is one of our most exciting challenges yet: a virtual assessment center. Penn State recently launched an online master's program for organizational leadership, a perfect opportunity to adapt the assessment center to changing times. Pursuing this type of assessment center presents us with new and exciting challenges. For example, we will have to grapple with new questions: "Will our current exercises translate appropriately to an online environment?" "What technology do we need?" "How can we incorporate the center activities into the ongoing master's program?" We are excited about this work and look forward to taking advantage of the creativity and technological savvy that we have on our team.

We hope that the review of our involvement in creating these four different assessment programs highlights an important point: With well-thought-out processes and evidence-based competency models at the core, an assessment center can be adapted to fit a variety of circumstances, needs,

and resource constraints. Because the Schreyer Honors College assessment center is the most developed of these, we will now explain how our assessment center came about and demonstrate why we have enjoyed ten years of positive outcomes. We provide this illustrative example of the considerations and results of our efforts for the Schreyer Honors College in hopes that the details are informative for those who might consider the development of an assessment center at their own institutions.

## **HOW TO BUILD AN ASSESSMENT CENTER: THE SCHREYER HONORS COLLEGE EXAMPLE**

The idea for an assessment center at Penn State came from members of our Penn State IO psychology program who had extensive experience with assessment centers in both research and practice. The first step was to create a value proposition for a student-based assessment center and to discuss the feasibility of developing and operating such a program, which was no small endeavor in several ways: it would involve acquiring a large amount of resources in the form of buildings, personnel, and funding; it would require creativity in generating high-quality exercises; it would depend on diligence and focus on details in designing the logistics of the program; and we would need to carefully consider the scholars' development throughout the process.

The ideas that flowed from the early meetings included discussions of the gaps between the skills and abilities emphasized in a college versus an organizational setting as well as the ability of an assessment center to identify the extent of these gaps for specific students. Our university was well-positioned to provide these opportunities for our students in terms of expertise and of human as well as physical and human resources. Further, the program had the potential to engage alumni as assessors and as points of contact for future student employment. Overall, the driving philosophy was "What's good for the business community can also be good for the academic world when it comes to preparing honors students for the next step in their careers; it's time to migrate a good business practice to the educational arena."

### **Building the Foundation: Attaining Resources**

Although effective, assessment centers require large expenditures of time. In addition, they require high levels of expertise in order to develop the underlying competency model, the exercises used to assess students, the recruiting

and training of assessors, and the implementation of the entire process. Additionally, one must have the physical space conducive to running such an operation. This hurdle alone sometimes requires organizations to lease hotels or other multiple-room sites, adding substantially to the cost and feasibility of such an assessment method. For many organizations, this requirement exceeds capabilities, becomes cost prohibitive, or both. While this hurdle has often seemed insurmountable in the past, however, we have found creative ways to overcome it. For example, many campuses have buildings that go unused during the weekends that are perfect for running a traditional assessment center, as was the case at Penn State and Bryn Mawr. The Huck Life Sciences assessment center format rendered this challenge obsolete, as only one room is needed during an assessment, and a virtual assessment center would need no physical space.

Fortunately, Penn State had a substantial amount of potential waiting to be unwrapped, with all the pieces of the puzzle to build the assessment center either present or within reach. All that was necessary was assembling the right team of experts and contacting the various units on and off campus that could contribute to developing the tools necessary to assess the students.

## **Designing and Developing Assessment Tools**

Once the resources are in place for the assessment center, the first step of developing the content is selecting a competency model to work towards. For the many reasons previously listed, we chose Bartram's Great Eight competency model and would highly recommend it to those pursuing an assessment center in their own honors college. It is possible to create a unique set of competencies that fit each university's specific mission and students, as was the case with the Bryn Mawr assessment center. It takes a great deal of time and contemplation, however—the Bryn Mawr competency model took a year to develop and polish—and thus is only advisable for those whose needs are quite different from the Great Eight and those who have the time and enthusiasm to create an effective and comprehensive competency model.

Once the competency model is selected, the real creativity begins. Challenges in this step of the process include (1) creating fictitious organizations and scenarios, (2) developing exercises to give participants opportunities to demonstrate the competencies, (3) providing evaluation tools for our assessors to make ratings, and (4) proposing a process for delivering feedback to participants. The Penn State team was fortunate to have had teams of PhD students and undergraduate research assistants (URAs) who were and

still are able to provide thoughtful ideas and work to implement them. The original ideas for the fictitious organizations and activities came from PhD seminars on training and development, the founders of the center, and individual members of the assessment center volunteer team.

All the discussion in the beginning led to the creation of our first fictitious scenario, Crazy Bean, which centers on two local coffee chains that must work together to combat competition from an incoming nationwide coffee chain similar to Starbucks. Each fictitious scenario includes the organization that the participant “works” for throughout the assessment center session, a description of problems that the organization is currently facing, and the materials that the participant needs to help solve these problems. The scenarios need to ensure that undergraduate scholars can realistically relate to them, that they put everyone on an equal playing field, and that they do not risk becoming obsolete in the near future. In addition to Crazy Bean, we have developed scenarios based on a movie theater looking to partner with an existing restaurant in town to avoid closing, a summer camp for underprivileged children that is experiencing funding and employee turnover issues, a non-profit organization that pairs school-aged children with college-aged role models experiencing similar issues, and a non-profit that focuses on job placement for the unemployed that is having trouble getting enough prospective employees.

No singular formula or process for this part of the assessment center development guarantees success; however, team brainstorming sessions in environments that are conducive to open discussion and that include URAs have been helpful. The URAs play an especially useful part during this portion of the creative process because they not only contribute unique ideas but also their perspective on whether their peers would be able to relate to the organization and situation.

As we continue to develop more scenarios and improve on old ones, students—undergraduates and graduates alike—have also helped the center leverage technological advances in file-sharing and online website creation, enabling us to make our materials more realistic and create a more efficient rating and feedback process. Recognizing the unique contributions that all team members can make, we have strived to create a welcoming environment in which all have a voice in the creative process.

The information about the fictitious organization and situation, which we call the “background information,” typically includes both qualitative and quantitative data; each is an important component that is highly valued in

organizational life. For example, in the Crazy Bean scenario, we include data on the financial performance of each store, performance evaluations of the managers, and store inspection forms, among other data. Participants use this information to complete a case study, which asks them to identify the top three managers and provide ideas for improving store performance.

After specifying the background information, we consider the various exercises that our participants will engage in during their day-long experience. We have found that providing the background materials in advance, along with the case-study exercise requiring each participant to write and submit a two-page executive summary of the materials, has been effective for several reasons. First, participants will be familiar with the organization and situation before they arrive for their day at the center. Second, we can assess their ability to communicate effectively in writing and evaluate how they summarize a large amount of information into a brief report. Third, it indicates whether individuals have taken the necessary preparation seriously and are committed to putting in the effort to make the experience useful. We require that scholars submit their responses to the case study three days in advance of the assessment date. If they fail to do so, they lose their spot to someone on the waiting list. Originally, we did not require scholars to submit their work in advance, but several of them either showed up for the day at the center without having written responses to the case study or wrote substandard responses that indicated a lack of effort.

Beyond the case study exercise, we also include written exercises for scholars during the assessment center day to represent writing assignments that are more spontaneous and have tighter deadlines. For instance, scholars may be asked to respond to an email from an unhappy customer or inform an applicant that he or she was not selected for a position. Such exercises enable us to evaluate scholars' competencies in writing, which can often be different from their ability to communicate in person. We often use the written exercises to assess the Supporting and Cooperating competency since students who may be supportive, encouraging, and understanding in face-to-face conversation are sometimes blunt and inflexible in writing. Many times, the opposite is true.

To assess the in-person skills, we include interactive exercises: e.g., a business-based presentation, during which participants present their solutions to the core problem of the scenario to an executive from the company; a role-play, which typically takes the form of a meeting with a disgruntled employee or upset parent; and a leaderless group discussion (LGD), which brings up



to six participants together to solve a new problem or make an important organizational decision as a group. For some scenarios, we also include a mini-presentation, which is a surprise meeting in which one of the executives stops into the participant's office unannounced to get a quick update on something; this can be one opportunity to assess Adapting and Coping, which can also be accomplished through pointed questions after the participant has delivered his or her presentation.

We assign competencies to each of these exercises based on the problems they must solve and the skills they must use. For example, the LGD is often an opportunity to assess Creating and Conceptualizing because the team members present potential solutions to a problem, and it can also assess Organizing and Executing because team members must keep each other on track to complete all required tasks within the time limit of the exercise. An example of a competency coverage matrix for one of our scenarios can be found in Figure 1, which demonstrates the competencies assessed in each of the exercises.

Some of the challenge involved in creating these exercises is engendering a natural fit with the initial background information provided about the organization and situation. Often, we need to generate additional background information to make the exercises more involved and realistic, which typically renders the materials development process nonlinear.

After the background information and exercises have been developed, the next step is to develop tools for our assessors to provide ratings of participants on the Great Eight competencies. An important aspect of this step is making clear to assessors which behaviors and aspects of participants' responses represent each of the competencies that are being assessed by the exercise. Landy & Farr and Jacobs, Kafry, & Zedeck concluded that having behavior-based rating scales tends to produce more reliable and valid ratings of performance. These behaviorally anchored rating scales (BARS) or behavioral observation scales (BOS) assist raters in providing accurate assessments that convey important behavioral information for participants during the feedback process. We refer to our rating tools as *rater guidelines* and have a separate set for each exercise, each containing desired and inappropriate behaviors linked to each competency. Figure 2 provides an example of one of our rater guidelines.

To prevent their being overwhelmed by the number of behaviors for each competency in each exercise, we train our assessors in how to use the rater guidelines by teaching them to follow a series of steps. First, assessors take notes of the behaviors that each participant exhibits as the exercise takes



**FIGURE 1. EXERCISES CAPTURING COMPETENCY DOMAINS**

Competency Domain	Presentation	Mini-Presentation	Role-Play	Leaderless Group Discussion	Written Assessment	Case Study
Leading & Deciding	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓
Supporting & Cooperating			✓	✓	✓	
Interacting & Presenting	✓		✓	✓		
Analyzing & Interpreting	✓				✓	✓
Creating & Conceptualizing		✓		✓		✓
Organizing & Executing			✓	✓		
Adapting & Coping	✓	✓				

place. After the participant finishes, the assessors leave the room and return to their own offices. At that time, raters fill out their rater guidelines individually by consulting their handwritten notes, considering how effectively the participant performed each relevant behavior. The assessor then selects the behavioral example most representative of the participant. After considering all the behaviors listed for a given competency, the assessor then examines the holistic pattern of effectiveness ratings to provide an overall rating for that competency, repeating this process for each competency before meeting as a team to decide the participant's final ratings and the feedback to be provided.

In the case of our Leadership Assessment Center, we are fortunate to have experience with what scholars are likely to do in each type of exercise—a starting point that we can modify and adapt based on our graduate students' suggestions. All our PhD students have experience as assessors, so their input in the development of rater guidelines is invaluable. Our first attempt at developing the guidelines required us to run pilot sessions and observe and record the behaviors of participants during each exercise without providing any ratings. That early pilot study provided information about what behaviors we should include for each competency, and we constantly learn more and revise our rating tools based on feedback from our assessors. To remain effective and valuable for scholar development, an assessment center must focus on continuous improvement, and the team must be willing to adapt the process and content as technology and the student population change. The team needs to acknowledge that none of the materials will ever be perfect, and we strive to make updates after each of our assessment center sessions. While the creation of the materials for both participants and volunteer assessors involves ample time and energy, the efforts come to fruition four times a year when we run the assessment center. Despite the almost eight-hour commitment on a Saturday, nearly all those involved comment on how the day seems to fly by.

## **The Feedback Process**

Critical to the success of any assessment center is the process used to communicate the assessors' evaluations to the participants. At our center, we spend a great deal of time making sure the observations of the assessors not only accurately summarize their evaluations using quantitative rating scales but also provide rich qualitative behavioral feedback. Of equal if not greater importance to the numerical scores is the assessors' documentation of specific behaviors they observed that highlight scholars' strengths and areas for future development. While a numerical score helps scholars gauge their current level

**FIGURE 2. EXAMPLE INTERACTING & PRESENTING RATER GUIDELINES FOR A PRESENTATION EXERCISE**

Interacting & Presenting				
Communicates and networks effectively: Successfully persuades and influences others. Relates to others in a confident, relaxed manner.				
Highly Ineffective	3	Moderately Effective	6	Highly Effective
1	2	4	5	7
<input type="checkbox"/> Failed to state purpose of meeting.	<input type="checkbox"/> Provided a <u>vague</u> or <u>misleading</u> purpose for the meeting.	<input type="checkbox"/> Stated the purpose and overview of the meeting <u>clearly</u> and <u>accurately</u> .		
<input type="checkbox"/> The order of topics seemed <u>haphazard</u> and did not make sense.	<input type="checkbox"/> <u>Many</u> topics flowed logically from one to the next.	<input type="checkbox"/> Structured the meeting so that the presentation flowed logically from one topic to the next.		
<input type="checkbox"/> Made <u>few/no attempts</u> to transition from one topic to the next.	<input type="checkbox"/> Made <u>some attempts</u> to transition from one topic to the next.	<input type="checkbox"/> Transitioned smoothly when changing topics.		
<input type="checkbox"/> Provided <u>no</u> conclusion or one that did not re-cap the presentation very well.	<input type="checkbox"/> Provided an <u>overly brief/long</u> conclusion for the presentation.	<input type="checkbox"/> Provided a conclusion that effectively re-capped the presentation.		
<input type="checkbox"/> Spoke too <u>quickly/slowly/softly/loudly</u> throughout the presentation.	<input type="checkbox"/> Spoke too <u>quickly/slowly/softly/loudly</u> at times.	<input type="checkbox"/> Spoke at an appropriate pace and volume.		
<input type="checkbox"/> Stammered and hesitated <u>throughout</u> .	<input type="checkbox"/> Stammered and hesitated <u>at times</u> .	<input type="checkbox"/> Spoke fluently and confidently.		
<input type="checkbox"/> Visual aids were confusing and hindered the spoken messages throughout.	<input type="checkbox"/> Visual aids sometimes helped sometimes hindered the spoken messages.	<input type="checkbox"/> Incorporated visual aids that enhanced the spoken messages.		
<input type="checkbox"/> <u>Rarely</u> , if ever, made eye contact.	<input type="checkbox"/> Made eye contact for <u>much</u> of the talk.	<input type="checkbox"/> Maintained eye contact <u>throughout</u> .		
<input type="checkbox"/> Non-verbal communication was distracting <u>throughout</u> the presentation.	<input type="checkbox"/> Non-verbal communication was distracting <u>at times</u> .	<input type="checkbox"/> Non-verbal communication effectively complemented his/her spoken messages.		

<p><input type="checkbox"/> Made <u>inappropriate</u> attempts at humor.</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Made no <u>attempts</u> to explain ideas or thought process, or was very confusing when attempting to do so.</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Did <u>not</u> use examples to illustrate ideas.</p>	<p><input type="checkbox"/> Made no <u>attempts</u> at humor.</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Was <u>inconsistent</u> in how well he/she explained ideas and thought process.</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Used some examples that helped illustrate <u>some</u> ideas.</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> <u>Rushed</u> to finish on-time, or <u>stretched</u> to fill the time.</p>	<p><input type="checkbox"/> Interjected humor <u>appropriately</u>.</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Explained ideas and thought process well <u>throughout</u>.</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Used clear examples and facts to illustrate <u>many</u> ideas.</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Managed time <u>effectively</u> by finishing the presentation without having to rush or without more than 1 minute left.</p>
<p><b>Notes &amp; Observations:</b></p>		

of competence, the contextualization of the numbers with behavioral examples assists them in more deeply understanding their performance, enabling them to take concrete actions toward improving their behavior.

To obtain the most accurate behavioral feedback, we ask our assessors to reflect on specific positive and negative behaviors they observed during each participant interaction within the context of each focal competency for that interaction. Each assessor works with one or two other assessors throughout the day to rate and document participant behaviors. Immediately following each interaction, assessor teams record their behavioral observations in an online document.

Once all exercises are complete, the assessor teams come together to discuss each participant's performance and what it means for his or her development, including any behavioral trends that emerged across exercises, across competencies, or in any other pattern. These types of behavioral patterns typically provide useful feedback to participants. For example, some individuals who remain calm and composed during activities that they can prepare for, e.g., the presentation, become fidgety and nervous during more impromptu activities like the role play or LGD. Noting such trends provides context for the different scores that they receive and facilitates decisions about where to focus their development efforts. After the assessors finish discussing their feedback for each participant, a graduate assessor who interacted with that participant captures the details to generate a comprehensive report for the participant. Over the next week, the graduate student customizes a fifteen- to twenty-page report detailing the scholar's scores for each exercise and each competency as well as summarizing the behavioral feedback from each. The report includes important information for creating a development plan, including resources on and off campus that the scholars can use for developing each competency.

Within ten days of the assessment, the graduate student assessors meet face-to-face with their designated participant to go over the feedback in the report. This one-on-one meeting is an important component of the feedback process. Since many of the scholars are receiving critical developmental feedback for the first time, the in-person meeting enables the feedback session to be interactive and developmental rather than seeming critical. The graduate students who provide this feedback are trained on effective strategies for introducing the report and ways of presenting the information. At the start of the hour-long session, the graduate student probes the undergraduate scholar for more information regarding the extracurricular activities and hobbies they

engage in outside of the classroom. This conversation not only builds rapport between the individuals but also enables the graduate student to provide recommendations later with respect to developmental opportunities that might be part of the scholar's preferred activities. Further, the graduate student integrates feedback from personality and other leadership survey tools that the participant has completed as part of the assessment. After reviewing the feedback section of the report, the graduate student introduces the concept of developmental planning to the scholar. Although some participants are shy during their feedback session, some ask many questions. Sessions typically run from forty-five to sixty minutes, but at least one enthusiastic student asked so many questions that the session lasted two hours.

The development plan included at the end of the report is a recent process change that our team implemented. Previously, we helped scholars create goals and requested that they sign a goal contract pledging to work toward the goals that were set. To facilitate student development and behavior change, our team decided to reformat this section to be less contract-focused and more process-focused. First, graduate student assessors review at a high level what a development plan consists of, including an explanation that development means not only improving on weaknesses but leveraging strengths. Graduate students assist scholars in picking two or three competencies that were strengths and two or three that represent potential areas for growth, then helping to create a plan by guiding them through questions: How are you going to learn/demonstrate this skill? Who and/or what resources can help you? How will you track your progress? What is your target follow-up evaluation date? Walking scholars through this process helps to ensure that their goals are SMART—specific, measurable, action-oriented, realistic, and time-bound—and to educate them on how appropriate goal setting can enable growth.

Although the creation and management of an assessment center is no small feat, the developmental benefits for the students we have assessed make it well worth the time, energy, and expenditures involved. We hear time and time again of the significant impact it has had on students' lives and careers, as well as enthusiastic feedback from the professionals who have volunteered as assessors and from the graduate students who have worked on the content of the assessment center and served as assessors.

## TEN-YEAR RESULTS OF THE LEADERSHIP ASSESSMENT CENTER

### The Numbers Tell All: Quantifying Success

Over the past ten years, we have assessed over 400 scholars, the majority of whom were members of the Schreyer Honors College but with occasional participation from two other high-performing undergraduate groups: Buntton-Waller scholars, a fellowship program aimed at enhancing the racial and ethnic diversity at Penn State, and members of the Presidential Leadership Academy, a ninety-student, select organization focused on careers in leadership across a wide range of disciplines. Students have participated from all of the university’s academic colleges, as seen in Table 2.

Approximately two-thirds of our participants come from the Smeal College of Business (18%), the College of Engineering (20%), and the College of the Liberal Arts (28%). As our goal is to provide students with developmental feedback before entering the workforce, preference is given to juniors although we have seen all levels of students, including freshmen and fifth-year seniors. The average GPA of participants is 3.8. We are also pleased to attract a group of participants that is diverse in gender and nationality. Our sample is 46% female and consists of individuals from multiple countries.

In addition to coming from a variety of academic colleges and majors, the scholars who participate in the assessment center maintain a diverse set

**TABLE 2. PERCENT OF STUDENT PARTICIPANTS BY ACADEMIC COLLEGE**

College of Arts & Architecture	2%
College of Earth & Mineral Science	3%
Smeal College of Business	18%
College of Engineering	20%
College of Health & Human Development	4%
College of Liberal Arts	28%
College of Information Science & Technology	4%
Elberly College of Science	12%
College of Communication	4%
College of Education	1.5%
College of Agricultural Science	3.5%

Note: n = 236

of extracurricular activities, such as the Debate Society, the Student Red Cross Club, the Liberal Arts Mentorship program, the Club soccer team, and the Penn State Dance Marathon. Beyond these extracurricular activities, the scholars often have part-time jobs within the community and participate in internships during the summer. In sum, they represent a variety of backgrounds and involvements that is beneficial in fostering learning and development during the day of the assessment.

Individual growth and development are the ultimate goals of this experience. Although development is hard to quantify, one indicator of developmental potential is self-awareness regarding areas of strength and weakness. By comparing participants’ self-ratings of their competence prior to and immediately following the assessment with the scores provided by raters, we can quantify self-awareness. The results of these computations are in Table 3.

Overall, our analyses show that across six of the seven competencies we assess, the average participant tends to overrate his or her competence by almost a full point on a seven-point scale before participating in the assessment center and to become more accurate in assessing competencies following participation, evidenced by the difference of about half a point post-assessment for most competencies. This change in self-awareness comes prior to any knowledge of how they actually performed or their individualized feedback session. In other words, our results indicate that merely participating in the

**TABLE 3. PARTICIPANT SELF-AWARENESS SCORES BY COMPETENCY BEFORE AND AFTER PARTICIPATING IN THE ASSESSMENT CENTER**

	Average Pre-Assessment Self-Awareness Score	Average Post-Assessment Self-Awareness Score
Leading & Deciding	0.80	0.44
Supporting & Cooperating	0.90	0.57
Interacting & Presenting	0.38	0.26
Analyzing & Interpreting	0.90	0.62
Creating & Conceptualizing	0.33	0.25
Organizing & Executing	1.42	0.74
Adapting & Coping	-0.27	-0.50

*Note.* n = 236–316 pre-assessment scores; n = 190–246 post-assessment scores. Scores represent the difference between the participants self-rating and the rating given by assessors during the assessment center. Positive scores represent an over-estimation of competence, and negative scores represent an under-estimation of competence. A score of zero represents accurate self-awareness.



assessment day can serve to increase scholars' self-awareness—a promising sign for the future developmental efforts of these individuals.

Beyond indications of growth, the data show variability in scores across each assessment—indicated by both the range of ratings and standard deviations found in Table 4. The average score for each competency is between 4.1 and 5.3, suggesting that our scholars are “moderately effective” in each competency area. These data combine to indicate that while the students are demonstrating competence, we can still provide them with feedback for improvement in the various attributes that we assess. Finally, we have run additional analyses that have helped us determine no significant differences in average competency scores based on the scenario that the participants go through, giving us confidence that our scenarios are equally challenging and can be used interchangeably as vehicles for providing meaningful feedback.

### **On the Other Side: Reactions After the Assessment Day**

The reactions to our assessment center have been very positive not only from the scholars we assess but also from the assessors and the administrative team. Everyone involved in the center takes away valuable information and lessons learned.

At the end of each session, participants share their thoughts on the events of the day, including what they liked and what could be improved. The scholars remark time and again on the realism of the assessment center. In addition to exercises that reflect real-world leadership positions, the physical environment resembles that of a typical organization: all participants have their own offices, and all involved are asked to dress in business casual to enhance the professional environment. Participants have a schedule to follow but also free-time to converse with colleagues, assessors, and the staff. One scholar commented, “My assessment center experience gave me the opportunity to get acquainted with professional standards and expectations in a low-stakes, developmental environment,” suggesting that the experience helps scholars take risks as they try to understand appropriate office behavior and expectations before they enter the workforce. At the end of the assessment day, the participating scholars often express their gratitude for the opportunity and their enthusiasm, as well as some nervousness as they look forward to their feedback sessions.

Although the experience of the day is generally positive, we are also making an effort to better understand the extent of the assessment center's impact

**TABLE 4. RATINGS FROM ASSESSORS**

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	Mean	SD	N
Analyzing & Interpreting	0%	2%	8%	26%	43%	21%	0%	4.78	0.92	321
Creating & Conceptualizing	0%	2%	9%	24%	28%	33%	4%	4.95	1.12	321
Interacting & Presenting	0%	2%	12%	29%	39%	16%	0%	4.59	0.98	322
Leading & Deciding	0%	1%	10%	39%	40%	9%	0%	4.50	0.82	322
Organizing & Executing	0%	9%	20%	36%	28%	7%	0%	4.12	1.05	321
Supporting & Cooperating	0%	1%	10%	29%	45%	16%	0%	4.68	0.88	319
Adapting & Coping	0%	3%	5%	17%	21%	38%	16%	5.36	1.26	237

*Note.* Percentages in each column represent the percent of total students assessed who received that score on the competency of interest.

further down the scholars' career paths. We have had positive feedback from many of the scholars who took part in the early days and have now been in the workforce for several years. These individuals have expressed that the center not only helped them develop competencies important for success in their careers but also enabled them to better understand the importance of feedback in the career development process. Perhaps the most positive behavioral feedback we have received about the center is having several participants come back as URAs and/or as volunteer assessors years later.

From an assessor's standpoint, participating in the Leadership Assessment Center is just as gratifying. The overwhelming majority love being a part of the day, especially interacting with bright students and the assessment center team. The assessors we recruit are impressed and enthusiastic about the opportunity for honors students as well as their performance: "This center is a great rehearsal for case interviewing, which is now so common even in technical fields as an employment hiring tool," commented one of our recent assessors.

Assessors also appreciate the experience as a developmental opportunity for themselves, indicating how much they learn through the experience of assessing. For example, one assessor stated: "I found the PNC LAC team to be among the better teachers I've experienced as they taught me how to do this work. I am very grateful for this experience and plan to serve again as an assessor." The assessors who volunteer multiple times love watching the assessment center evolve, as mentioned in one repeat assessor's comments: "From the beginning, the center has been a powerful source of leadership development for students, and through constant refinement they continue to raise the bar."

The positive reactions do not end with scholars and assessors; the assessment center team has been the source of development and learning for the graduate and undergraduate students who make up the center's staff. Graduate student assessors can develop their mentorship and feedback skills, providing valuable experience for both teaching and managing later in their careers. "Although the center's purpose is to develop the students being assessed, I can safely say that participating as an assessor has been an incredible developmental opportunity for me as well," said one graduate student. Past center directors have loved running the assessment center, and it has given them a springboard into their careers; all those who have graduated have gone on to work in prestigious careers that enable them to apply what they have learned. A common theme among the former directors is the attribution of their career success to their experiences running the center.

Undergraduate assistants, too, are better prepared for the workforce thanks to helping with the assessment center. Most of them were assessed themselves, and their continued work with the center allows them to further develop their understanding of leadership and assessment center design as well as administrative and teamwork skills; they usually stay with us until they graduate. Many are interested in IO psychology and gain experience that will help them in applying to graduate schools. The assessment center recently helped one URA get a job as an assessment coordinator for a fitness company as they hire and train fitness instructors.

These positive reactions from all who help run and participate in our assessment center are our greatest indicator of success for these last ten years. The opportunity to provide actionable feedback, coupled with the development of our own graduate students and the sense of community that the assessment center builds, gives us a strong foundation for launching into the next ten years of operation.

## **THE FUTURE OF THE SCHREYER HONORS COLLEGE LEADERSHIP ASSESSMENT CENTER**

We always have our eye on future success and ensuring that we, as well as others who consider building assessment centers, are aware of the possibilities for adapting to technological and cultural change. To that end, we have ideas for adapting and improving our own assessment center.

Most recently, we have made efforts to focus our participants' attention on the ongoing process of leadership development. We are starting to develop curricula that can extend the effects of the one-day assessment into the months and years following. We began by facilitating the creation of a development plan during the feedback session. We have also recently begun to offer follow-up with the scholars in the subsequent semester to check on the progress they have made toward completion of the steps identified in their plans. Looking to the future, we are considering possibilities such as a mentorship program, leadership workshops, and creating a blog in order to keep the alumni of the program engaged and interested in leadership development initiatives.

Other future directions for our center include improvements grounded in empirical research, currently ongoing by members of our team. One of our goals is to use the extensive assessment data we have collected on scholars to better understand differences in developmental needs based on majors, allowing us to provide more targeted developmental resources to individuals as well as units on campus. Others interested in building assessment centers

for honors students may want to consider building these components in from the beginning, collecting data to assess trends over time. Putting as many of the materials online also makes running an assessment center more efficient in addition to creating a more accurate representation of current workplace trends in technology.

## **CONCLUSION**

Implementing change or building a new program is always a break from business as usual and is never easy. Creating an assessment center requires a great deal of support from a variety of constituencies. What we have found in our decade of work in this area, though, is that the concept of an assessment center makes sense to a variety of audiences, e.g., administrators and corporate sponsors who are called upon to provide funding; faculty and other professionals required to be part of the creation and ongoing implementation; and, most importantly, honors student participants who must volunteer for the process but ultimately are recipients of its benefits.

In our work with the PNC LAC at Penn State and subsequently with Northeastern, Bryn Mawr, the Huck Institutes, and online possibilities, we have discovered multiple paths for implementing a process to prepare student scholars for their next career step. We see assessment centers as an important way to broaden the educational experiences we bring to our scholars by engaging them in a real-world simulation and providing them with valuable feedback from those who have walked down many of the same halls of education and are now well into their professional careers.

Although not all students will go on to careers in business, a business simulation does provide participants with an experience unlike anything else they encounter in classes or extracurricular activities. Through the day-long set of exercises, students get a chance to exercise their leadership skills and receive structured feedback on the effectiveness of their actions by knowledgeable individuals. This type of process benefits students whether they are moving toward a career in business, government, or graduate education, and it orients students toward the need for receiving feedback and taking steps toward future development. We have found that our assessment center builds skills and abilities in all who participate, regardless of their role. The assessment center has also been an excellent calling card for Penn State in informing our alumni base and donors—past, present and future—of the work we are doing to enhance our educational programs.

Building an assessment center has been a challenging but rewarding experience for our team, and the benefits to our students and our community have been substantial. We hope that other honors programs will consider the benefits of an assessment center to their students and their community.

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