

Bettering Assessment Practices through Reflection and Collaboration

By Carrie R. Allen

Abstract: Although the COVID-19 situation was stressful for all faculty, staff, and students at Mercyhurst University, it provided a much-needed opportunity to improve assessment practices across the institution. Changing assessment reporting procedures for the 2019-2020 academic year to a more reflective, collaborative model is helping to shift faculty perceptions of assessment to collective rather than isolated, student-centered rather than administratively mandated, and intentional rather than incidental.

Like many small private colleges, Mercyhurst University spent a great deal of time under-resourced in the area of assessment. During its last reaccreditation cycle with the Middle States Commission for Higher Education (MSCHE), Mercyhurst was cited for doing too little to assess student learning across the institution. As a result, and as often happens in these situations, the assessment pendulum swung far in the opposite direction. A set of good-faith but misguided actions led the administrators at that time to institute a set of assessment measures largely focused on compliance and burdensome reporting requirements, but with little focus on the value of assessment, use of assessment data, and improvement of student learning.

In the considerable time since the last accreditation cycle, Mercyhurst has made some positive strides in assessment. A new set of faculty and administrators with a clearer view of assessment for improvement, rather than compliance, intervened and began working to change the culture. The pattern of excessive assessment reporting which was, understandably, frustrating for faculty, continues to shape the attitudes of some departments. While some have shifted their focus to assessment for improvement, others still consider assessment to be a box-checking endeavor separate from course design and overall department goals. COVID-19 presented an unexpected opportunity to address the lingering misconceptions and shift that focus.

Academic departments at Mercyhurst are required to complete annual assessment reports which are, notably and commendably, pared down from what was previously required. Departments develop five-year assessment plans, assess one or two outcomes each academic year, and then report findings back to the Office of Institutional Effectiveness (OIE). In light of the unusual circumstances of the Spring 2020 semester, OIE shifted away from this plan-assess-report model to a more reflective exercise. Drawing from a number of helpful resources made available online in March and April of 2020 including NILOA's [massive database of COVID-19 resources](#), the ASSESS listserv, and other institutional websites, OIE created a set of prompts for departments to discuss as a group (with these conversations facilitated by the Assessment Coordinator) and report consensus back to OIE through a Microsoft Form. Departments worked together to respond to the following eight prompts:

1. As your department moved courses online for the remainder of the Spring 2020 semester, did faculty reevaluate, revise, or reduce the number of their courses' learning outcomes? If so, how were these decisions made?
2. Did faculty make any changes to course policies, and if so, what was the process for making these changes?
3. Did faculty provide students an opportunity to reflect on their experiences moving to remote learning? If so, what insights/feedback did they provide about their transition?
4. What was the most difficult piece of your courses to transfer to a remote environment?
5. Did faculty change the way student learning was measured (e.g., changing or requiring fewer assignments, changing grading/evaluation procedures, etc.)?
6. Do faculty think students still achieved course learning outcomes with the change in delivery? What evidence was collected to support that students did or did not meet expectations?
7. What challenges did faculty face in collecting evidence of student learning?
8. Based on your experience this semester, does your department plan to make any changes to your

courses, such as changing how/when material is delivered, restructuring assignments or assessment methods, revising learning outcomes, etc.? If so, why are these changes being considered? Faculty reflection on how they delivered material and assessed student learning during a crisis situation, as well as the processes by which these decisions were made, has the potential to dramatically change how faculty perceive the value of assessment going forward. First, encouraging faculty to think critically about how they made decisions about their courses – instead of mandating that they submit meaningless percentages about how many students met which standards – reinforced that assessment is about inquiry and process, not just the end result.

Further, having faculty discuss their experiences as a department and report consensus to OIE reiterated that assessment produces more meaningful results when it is a collaborative process. Reflecting on experiences also provided faculty an opportunity to think critically about how moving to remote teaching and, in essence, stripping a course down to its bare bones, highlighted the learning outcomes that were most critical for that particular course. Faculty can now use that information to rethink and revise both course- and program-level outcomes, assignments, and assessments.

Finally, although not as important but important nonetheless, gathering department-level information provided the institution with documentation of student learning and how it was measured, keeping us in compliance with MSCHE and other entities.

Like most institutions of higher education, Mercyhurst has a way to go before turning entirely away from assessment for compliance and toward assessment for improvement. The assessment reflection exercise implemented for the 2019-2020 academic year, however, is a valuable stepping stone on that journey. By and large, Mercyhurst instructors, in a remarkably short amount of time and with an inspiring level of effort and patience, sharpened and refined their syllabi and teaching strategies to focus on what they felt were the most important learning outcomes in their courses and within their departments. Although the COVID-19 situation has been stressful for all involved, it has provided a much-needed opportunity for Mercyhurst to improve assessment practices across campus. Changing reporting practices to a more reflective, collaborative model is helping to shift faculty perceptions of assessment to collective rather than isolated, student-centered rather than administratively mandated, and intentional rather than incidental.

About the Author

Dr. Carrie R. Allen is the Assessment Coordinator in the Office of Institutional Effectiveness at Mercyhurst University. She can be reached at callen@mercyhurst.edu.