

University-wide Assessment During Covid-19: An Opportunity for Innovation

By Dena Pastor and Paula Love

Introduction

For more than 30 years, James Madison University (JMU) has used Assessment Days to collect longitudinal data on student learning outcomes. Our model ensures that all incoming students are tested twice: once in August before beginning classes and again in February after accumulating 45–70 credit hours (Pastor, Foelber, Jacovidis, Fulcher & Love, 2019). Although a student completes only four instruments each Assessment Day, 25 different assessments are administered, thereby allowing for the examination of student growth on a variety of different outcomes.

Various changes have been made to Assessment Day throughout the years, but none as dramatic as those we are making to the August 2020 Assessment Day in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. On a typical Assessment Day, students are assigned to one of three 2-hour testing sessions, where they complete their assessments while seated alongside their peers in a proctored classroom or computer lab. Although JMU is bringing students back to campus this fall, we will not be assessing students in person. Instead, we are assessing over 4,700 incoming first-year students remotely during a three-week period. The testing window has just opened, but in the preceding months we contended with two tough questions. First, we asked, “Should Assessment Day be in-person, cancelled, or remote?” and given our decision to go remote, we then asked, “What does a remote Assessment Day look like?” We share our answers to these questions below, hoping to help universities who might be asking if and how to adjust their assessment practices in response to COVID19. Grappling with these questions was not easy, but forced us to rethink and improve our practices and isn’t “rethinking and improving practices” what assessment is all about?

Should Assessment Day be in-person, cancelled, or remote?

COVID-19 forced us to review several options for August 2020’s Assessment Day: using our current in-person model, adopting remote testing, or cancelling the event altogether. We quickly rejected cancelling the event as we feel documenting and understanding the learning and development of college students has never been more essential than it is right now. Moving forward with our typical in-person model while adhering to university protocols for protecting public health required us to weigh the risks to public health against the benefits gained from an in-person experience. We decided the benefits did not outweigh the risks.

Although public health concerns primarily drove our decision to reject in-person testing, fiscal responsibility also contributed. A significant increase in the number of testing rooms would’ve been needed to accommodate physical distancing policies, which translates into the need for more proctors and supplies. Thus, in-person testing would not only risk increasing the spread of COVID-19 but would also significantly increase cost. Availability of proctors was also a factor as many of our proctors are retired community members, a population we suspect is currently reluctant to voluntarily co-mingle with college students. Remote assessment was decided to be the only viable option.

What does a remote Assessment Day look like?

Having made the decision to test remotely, we were then faced with making a multitude of other decisions very quickly, including what testing platform to use, whether to use a remote proctoring service, and how to convey the importance and value of Assessment Day to students.

One of the first decisions regarded which testing platform to use. Because 20% of students are tested in computer labs during a typical Assessment Day, we already have many instruments in Qualtrics, a web-based survey platform. As such, it made sense to continue utilizing Qualtrics. Of course, to use Qualtrics remotely, students need

access to a strong and stable internet connection and a device on which to take their assessments. Access to such technology might be challenging for some students and others might have trouble securing a quiet location free of distractions. For these reasons we are adopting a flexible three-week window for testing that starts before students arrive on campus and ends weeks after their arrival.

Another important decision was whether to use a remote proctoring service. We are well aware of the benefits of proctors; notably, proctors convey the importance of the assessments and create an environment that allows and encourages students to perform to the best of their ability (Lau, Swerdzewski, Jones, Anderson, & Markle, 2009). To use proctors remotely, however, would entail adoption of a third-party remote proctoring service where proctors are primarily used to monitor the testing session for acts of academic dishonesty. Ultimately, it was determined such services were cost-prohibitive (~\$10-\$12 per student). Also, in a low-stakes testing context, we were not overly convinced the advantages of remote proctoring outweighed the disadvantages; for example, concerns regarding privacy issues, test anxiety, or student access to needed technology (see Flaherty, 2020).

After working through the logistical challenges, we turned our attention towards how best to convey the importance and value of Assessment Day to students; something we feel is particularly important in a remote testing environment. We worked with University Marketing and Communication to ensure our emails to students, one informing students about the requirement and another providing instructions, were professional, eye-catching, and most importantly, mobile-friendly. Although we share a short video at the beginning of the testing session conveying the purpose of Assessment Day (<https://youtu.be/fv2yIOB4Tm8>), we worked with program directors to develop additional videos to describe each individual assessment. JMU's Media Production Services was kind enough to add finishing touches to make the videos appear polished and professional. It is our hope that these efforts, which would not be possible without the contributing expertise of several units on campus, will communicate to students the value of Assessment Day and translate into students performing to the best of their ability.

Conclusion

Despite our best efforts, we know August 2020 remote Assessment Day will have limitations. At the same time, we are optimistic that what we will learn will inform changes not only to spring 2021 Assessment Day, should it also be remote, but future Assessment Days beyond this academic year. Could COVID-19 serve as a catalyst for change in how we plan Assessment Days from now on? Perhaps this is the inciting event that disrupts our established practices and encourages us to think outside the box. Albert Einstein said, "In the midst of every crisis, lies great opportunity." We wish this crisis never occurred, but in the spirit of perseverance, we are using it as an opportunity to rethink and improve Assessment Day. After all, using results to improve student learning is at the very core of why we do assessment to begin with. It is only fitting that we approach our assessment processes with the same mindset.

References

- Flaherty, C. (2020, May 11). *Big proctor*. Inside Higher Ed.
https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2020/05/11/online-proctoring-surg-ing-during-covid-19?utm_source=Inside+Higher+Ed&utm_campaign=eebf0d01a5-DNU_2019_COPY_02&utm_medium=email&utm_term=0_1fcbc04421-eebf0d01a5-197359789&mc_cid=eebf0d01a5&mc_eid=99ac4a99e1
- Lau, A. R., Swerdzewski, P. J., Jones, A. T., Anderson, R. D., & Markle, R. E. (2009). Proctors matter: Strategies for increasing examinee efforts on general education program assessments. *Journal of General Education*, 58, 196–217. doi:10.1353/jge.0.0045

Pastor, D. A., Foelber, K. J., Jacovidis, J. N., Fulcher, K. H., Sauder, D. C., & Love, P. D. (2019). University-wide Assessment Days: The James Madison University model. *The Association for Institutional Research (AIR) Professional File, Article 144*, 1-13.

About the Authors

Dr. Dena Pastor is the Associate Director for Assessment Operations and Professor of Graduate Psychology at James Madison University. She can be reached at pastorda@jmu.edu

Paula Love is the Administrative Assistant for the Center for Assessment and Research Studies at James Madison University. She can be reached at lovepd@jmu.edu.