

Considerations for Meaningful Assessment During COVID-19

By Laura M. Harrison and Marc Scott

Abstract: COVID-19 presents assessment professionals with an opportunity to reexamine preexisting inequities for vulnerable student groups that may be more susceptible to the pandemic's economic impacts. We propose that assessment professionals incorporate student interviews more intentionally in their work so they and their stakeholders can develop more meaningful understandings of these inequities, provide a higher degree of contact with students, and appreciate better how policies enacted during the pandemic may impact students.

Introduction

Institutions of higher education have grappled with how to respond to COVID-19 while maintaining core functions and services for students. While COVID-19 has upended the notion of “normal” in higher education, regional accreditors such as the Higher Learning Commission have continued to emphasize quality and continuous improvement. In those “normal” times before the pandemic, many faculty and staff saw assessment activities as a distraction from teaching and scholarship. To many on our campuses, assessment activities will almost feel superfluous during a pandemic.

As educators and assessment professionals in an underserved region of Appalachia Ohio, we see carefully conducted assessment utilizing creative methodologies and methods as necessary to providing meaningful, useful data while also developing rich understandings of inequities predating COVID-19. For instance, consider that forty percent of students who enroll in four-year US public universities will fail to graduate within six years (NCES, 2018). This failure carries enormous costs for individual students, institutions of higher education, and society at large before the COVID-19 crisis. Costs directly related to dropping out of college include lower salaries (OECD, 2019), higher student loan default rates (US Department of Education, 2015), and higher rates of depression and stress (Fass, Benson, Kaestle, & Savla, 2018).

COVID-19 exacerbates these costs as students, families, and universities grapple with the economic fall-out of unemployment. The current moment calls for a serious examination of what factors contribute to students' ability to be successful in college. This call prompted us to collect survey and interview data at Shawnee State University in the spring semester of 2020. Although we did not set out to study the experience of conducting programmatic assessment during

COVID-19, we learned some lessons we believe will be of value for those doing this work in the months to come. We offer these recommendations not as replacements to existing assessment methods but as ways to add value to existing assessments plans, to provide decision makers with actionable data, and to develop deeper understandings of student experiences during COVID- 19—particularly for underrepresented students.

Lesson #1: The Time is Ripe for Elevating Qualitative Data

There are many large-scale studies of student experiences and learning in higher education, such as the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) or the Collegiate Learning Assessment (CLA). This kind of work provides great value, but often from a 30,000-foot view. We need nuanced understandings of local context; these kinds of insights can only be gained using methods that allow for in-depth analysis. In our interviews, we asked students what they meant by certain words and tailored follow-up questions to their specific experiences. This allowed us to achieve a richness in our comprehension of what helped and what hindered each student's ability to be successful in college.

Large-scale surveys and assessment projects produce quantitative data that can prove useful in demonstrating student learning and advocating on behalf of students. However, decisions may lose the human story behind those numbers unless qualitative data and student voices match the numbers craved by administrators and legislators. When students can tell their unique stories, they become more tangible to policy makers and other stakeholders who can then make more useful recommendations for practice. For example, many of our student

participants spoke of the significance of being able to approach professors before and after class to ask questions and make connections. While this may seem like a small point, it was important to many students, particularly commuters with limited time on campus and first-generation students less informed about office hours and contacting faculty. With the move to online environments due to COVID-19, we need to provide opportunities for faculty-student engagement. This is the kind of phenomenon university leaders and policy makers need to be aware of when decision making (e.g., determining class sizes and faculty workloads).

These methodologies aren't so far afield in assessment circles. Assessment practitioners have integrated qualitative methodologies—such as interview, focus groups, and observations—over the last couple decades, particularly in programmatic assessment (Cook et al., 2016; Rodgers, et al., 2012). COVID-19 presents a unique opportunity to extend this integration in

light of students' interest in sharing their experiences with those who will be making decisions about the future of higher education.

Lesson #2: Students Want to be Interviewed

Concerns surrounding survey fatigue have become more pronounced in our quest to respond to the issues of this challenging time. Students crave the kind of thoughtful and personalized attention afforded by the opportunity to be interviewed about their experiences. We were heartened by how many of the students we interviewed thanked us for listening to them. They felt their concerns were taken seriously when actual human beings took the time to meet with them rather than asking them yet again for more anonymous data to put into a report. Many responded to requests for member checking, carefully corrected transcripts and wished us good luck with our work. Even in conducting survey research, providing students the option to be contacted about concerns they express in the survey provides another opportunity to align assessment with retention efforts.

Lesson #3: Assessment can be a Touchpoint

We may have been trained to conduct disinterested research, but interviews provide an opportunity to not only study student struggle, but also to try to ameliorate it. When students open up to us about some of their most vulnerable moments, we can honor them by providing a sounding board they can use to imagine potential strategies. We can ask questions that not only address our own work but that help students think through their own academic challenges and strengths as well. Encouragement can play a powerful role in supporting students to stay motivated through difficult times.

Survey research and other quantitative methods can provide faculty and other assessment practitioners with useful, persuasive data for a range of stakeholders. However, careful use of qualitative research can provide much needed context that can better identify and explain the relationships between student learning and student behavior. Given the economic impact of COVID-19 on higher education and the persistent socio-economic disparities predating and exacerbated by COVID-19, faculty, staff, and administrators need not just *quick* data, but *rich* data that helps decision makers understand the context of their decisions and better grasp the impact of those decisions.

References

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