Anyone Else Tired of Pivoting? Unmasking Student Learning and Community Assessment Needs
By Tara K. Ising and James D. Breslin

Implementing a new strategic plan, Bellarmine University centralized Assessment, Accreditation, and Institutional Effectiveness in 2019. Leading this new unit, we crafted a strategic plan and began to implement initiatives to improve institutional assessment practices.

Based on previous experiences, we knew a couple of things. First, few faculty are *trained* to assess student learning effectively. Second, our institution historically embraced the position that assessment was something we "do for accreditation" rather than part of quality improvement related to teaching and learning. As part of our strategic plan, we were developing a university-wide assessment curriculum. At minimum, our goal was to deploy several learning opportunities and certify individuals as Assessment Ambassadors.

Then came the week of March 9, 2020. Remote teaching, learning, and working for two weeks. Then two more. Then the term.

As a mid-sized liberal arts institution, Bellarmine has comparatively few online course offerings and only minor fully online graduate programs. Panicked faculty began learning, many for the first time, how to use our learning management system. Our larger Academic Affairs team worked day and night to leverage as many resources as we could for displaced students and for faculty who were transitioning to new modalities. Student Affairs professionals personally called every undergraduate to check in and learn how they were handling this new normal. Within a couple weeks when it was clear the pandemic would not abate soon, we launched what we internally deemed a Pulse Survey, attempting to assess whether our efforts were beneficial and other ways that we could support students and faculty. We anticipated students would express financial concerns, mental health needs, and various difficulties with virtual learning environments and transitioning. Surely, our outreach efforts had helped provide support. Anecdotally (prior to the survey), and in their own item responses, faculty remarked how favorably their online working relationships had been going.

Cue the old saying, "*you know what happens when you assume…*" In addition to the predicted student concerns, we found a theme that emerged from the qualitative feedback that caught us by surprise. Students were feeling inundated, *by us*.

There were roughly six weeks remaining in the semester. As they shifted online, students dealt with their new realities, as well as check-ins by student affairs personnel and by concerned faculty. The activities associated with the chaotic nature of our instructional change, coupled with what felt like unremitting obligatory check-ins, left less time for schoolwork; and some students perceived the check-ins as perfunctory. As one student indicated, "Every time I get on the phone with someone, whether it is to discuss my research or a check in with a [sic] staff, I have felt like that person could not wait to get off the phone with me and get on to the next student, or go help their kids with school, or do something for their family, and so on." Others responded to the question, "What could Bellarmine have done differently?" with "Not kicked me out (of the residence halls) and also didn't constantly send me 10 paragraph emails about how 'we're all in this together.'" and "It just felt like every time I opened my email, I had anywhere from 5–10 emails that I needed to read through and/or reply to" (Bellarmine University Climate Survey, 2020). We learned there's a thin line between consistent, transparent communication and over-communicating or appearing inauthentic.

Moreover, we learned that the gap between university and student perception was pervasive in other domains. Some of our seasoned faculty had never taught online or engaged with our learning management system. Students left campus with an understanding of the required work to complete their courses. According to our survey results faculty did not. As students stated in their responses, "(Bellarmine should have) instructed professors to have a uniform approach to how much work was assigned to students." "Some professors are using this time to assign

MORE homework and that's not how it should be." "In some of my classes, my professors have been much more strict [sic] on grading." Another noted, "Emphasized to professors that assigning additional term projects/papers (as in, for the same class, in addition to the final projects they already assigned) to 'make up points' is not an appropriate response to a global crisis, and will not express the work that those of us who are struggling right now have put in for the majority of the semester." (Bellarmine University Climate Survey, 2020)

These findings were insightful and a bit disheartening. Bellarmine's brand is its dedicated faculty. However, a portion of them were unable to transfer their formative and summative practices. As evidenced in their comments, students felt overwhelmed by what they reported as a substantive increase in class work. Our analysis is that instructors who had long relied on their *sense* of what and how students were learning in the classroom were at a loss for how to measure learning. The result was an imposing increase in the number of assignments, quizzes, and the like in many courses. The outcome was that some students were inundated with additional work at a time they were trying to navigate the slow-motion trauma of the global pandemic.

As a new academic year approaches, with the promise of continued online instruction, we face a real challenge. How do we change the narrative for faculty who aren't well-versed in student learning assessment while also working remotely? We don't have all the answers, but are considering the following:

- Short, on-demand videos for instructors providing easy-to-use assessment methods for online teaching. Our office is supervising a Doctoral student for a teaching practicum who will support us in this effort.
- Individual consultations with faculty with an offer to review their syllabi beforehand and discuss assessment strategies and student workload.
- Group or individual help sessions with instructors to match individual assignments to course outcomes, perhaps including how items on rubrics they may have developed for grading support this alignment.

It's clear that the pandemic has changed just about everything. On our campus, we've learned that we need to ameliorate this mismatch in expectations and are eager to deploy our assessment expertise to support our community. Also, please wear a mask.

Reference
Bellarmine University. (2020). *University Climate Survey* [Internal assessment tool]. Office of
  Assessment, Accreditation, and Institutional Effectiveness, Bellarmine University.

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2