

Let's Connect: Maintaining and Strengthening Collaborative Relationships in a Remote Environment

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Introduction

As higher education assessment professionals, our work relies on effective interpersonal collaboration. Terms such as guide, political navigator (Jankowski & Slotnick, 2015), and change agent (Ariovich et al., 2019) often encapsulate our institutional roles. Relationship-building and collaboration are foundational to effective assessment practice in higher education (Kinzie, Jankowski, & Provezis, 2014; Rickards & Stitt-Berg, 2016; Smith, 2013), and because of the COVID-19 pandemic, we are confronted with a new challenge of staying connected and accessible from a distance. The RARE Model (Clucas Leaderman & Polychronopoulos, 2019) is a framework for nurturing collaborative relationships in assessment practice. The four components (R- relate, A- acknowledge, R- reflect, E- Empower), which are based in humanistic and postmodern counseling theories, outline interpersonal strategies to better support and strengthen relationships with our faculty and staff colleagues. Until this past spring semester, our experiences employing this approach with colleagues and clients were primarily in person. While reflecting upon our assessment practices throughout this time, we wondered: *how do these strategies translate to a virtual environment?* Throughout this experience, we have found ourselves prioritizing the strategies to Relate and Acknowledge; now more than ever, it is critical to focus on building and nurturing relationships with our assessment partners. A more detailed outline of adapted RARE Model strategies is forthcoming; here, we offer a few examples of what has worked so far, as we continue to navigate the remote environment.

Relate: Stay present and connected from a distance

Before we can reach the heart of our assessment work with colleagues, it behooves us to be present and attuned to the obstacles they endure. Faculty and staff need to know that someone understands the challenges they face daily, whether during the pandemic or otherwise. The *Relate* component of the RARE Model encourages assessment professionals to use active listening as an instrument for empathy. Being informed, flexible, and bringing our assessment partners together have supported our efforts to effectively communicate empathy and understanding.

Be informed. It is easy to feel even more disconnected from our colleagues as separate units within the same institution during this time. Like us, our faculty and staff counterparts are relying mostly on email communications to stay abreast of constant changes, which can quickly lead to overwhelming emotions and feelings of isolation. Whether it is a new update regarding a budget decision, evolving circumstances, or competing demands, it is important for assessment professionals to stay informed and tuned in to unique faculty and staff experiences. For example, subscribe to the email listservs on your campus that you may not otherwise receive, so that you are aware of new information that faculty and staff are receiving at the same time. Other examples might include reading minutes from special committees or task forces on campus and keeping an eye on social media accounts connected with your institution. Then, you can check in with others about what you are seeing and hearing and ask how you can offer support.

Be flexible. Staying informed helps us to be flexible with our colleagues. This strategy has felt more cumbersome than usual because information is continuously changing. However, understanding why our partners are being pulled in multiple directions can help us develop more realistic expectations about timelines and setting new deadlines. One example is reimagining what assessment reporting may look like this year. Does it make sense to individualize this timeframe and/or keep it on a rolling basis to accommodate different levels of progress?

Another example of flexibility involves adjusting our own forms of outreach. We may not be able to maintain consistent office hours or facilitate in-person workshops like before; however, we can still maintain and enhance our presence online. Some examples include hosting virtual coffee/lunch hours, recording meetings or training

sessions (with permission) for colleagues to reference later, or including a meeting request link in your signature to reduce back-and-forth scheduling email clutter.

Be a convener. Strengthening collaborative partnerships requires assessment leadership that brings people together while promoting connectedness, trust, and communicating that their participation matters. As many folks have experienced in the past few months, virtual meetings can sometimes feel even more exhausting than in-person meetings. For this reason, we have taken extra care to consider “Zoom fatigue” before asking colleagues to participate in (yet another) meeting by asking ourselves, *“Is there another way to connect with each other and share this information that is effective, without consuming too much (already depleted) mental energy from our colleagues?”* When an online meeting has been deemed necessary, it is imperative to articulate its purpose, the necessity of individuals’ presence in the process, and the anticipated outcomes that will be achieved by its conclusion. Convening effectively in a remote environment can help promote engagement and active participation in assessment.

Assessment professionals may also have access to resources that faculty or staff colleagues do not regularly receive (e.g., free webinars or professional development tools); however, we can relate to the experience of being flooded with too much information. Consider sharing insights about common challenges and solutions you have synthesized from various sources, which could be useful in your colleagues’ specific circumstances. For example, in your next newsletter or mass communication, label the issues that schools, departments, and divisions are frequently experiencing at your institution, to reassure colleagues they are not alone in their assessment journeys. By curating information and resources according to your colleagues’ specific needs, it provides an opportunity to join them while also encouraging a sense of community and working to break down silos.

Acknowledge: Build upon existing resources and reframe the situation

By emphasizing the supportive processes, individuals, and materials that already exist, we can help our colleagues to identify the next step in their assessment cycle. This discussion includes a laser focus on what is going well. The *Acknowledge* component encourages us to help our colleagues to build upon their strengths and resources, as well as reframe challenging situations into opportunities for advancement or progress.

Having a sense of curiosity about what is most important to the assessment partner’s department or division can help us align assessment work accordingly. For example, inquiring about their priorities as they relate to student learning encourages future strategic action when closing the loop. In this way, we are helping our partners shift their mindset from viewing this year’s assessment project as another thing to add to their to-do list, to instead seeing it as a way of working more efficiently. This shift in mindset informs possibilities for faculty and staff to use assessment as a meaningful process to help them meet their goals.

New challenges: Assessment professionals as resilient leaders

Assessment professionals have a responsibility to strengthen and nurture the collaborative relationships we have fostered, which are foundational to a positive culture of assessment. Through practicing the “R- relate” component of the RARE Model, we can stay present and connected from a distance by adapting strategies to the remote environment. Our colleagues need us to continue taking the temperature on our campuses, reaching out and responding in ways that consider their needs, and bringing them together to stimulate meaningful dialogue and action. The “A- acknowledge” component prompts us to lighten our workload by reminding colleagues about the tools and resources available to them, employing a lens that inspires efficiency and growth.

Yet, in our ongoing efforts to stay connected with colleagues on our own campuses, we needn’t forget about our fellow assessment practitioners at other institutions. As travel budgets continue to shrink, we cannot rely on in-person professional development experiences. So far, we feel encouraged by the AALHE virtual conference experience and webinars, the supportive ASSESS listserv, NILOA resources, and ongoing engagement with professional social media channels. An empowering context and community can continue to be fostered among

assessment professionals by asking ourselves: How can we purposefully network, while continuing to engage in peer learning and support without waiting for the next conference?

Although we continue to feel a sense of uncertainty in preparation for the upcoming academic year, we also feel inspired by the creativity, collegiality, and sense of community we are creating at our own institutions and simultaneously experiencing as a collective profession. Facing these new challenges together reminds us that we are resilient and resourceful. We believe the strength of our relationships will help us persevere during the pandemic and in the ongoing evolution of higher education assessment.

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