

Leading with Empathy and Learning to Flex

By Eileen Soto and Jamie Smith

When instruction shifted online as a result of COVID-19 in March 2020, Educational Effectiveness staff considered how best to serve our institution with available resources, skills, and services, while maintaining ongoing assessment. Administration of program-level assessment activities, such as overseeing the completion of program reviews, planning for upcoming program reviews, and advising faculty on annual program learning outcome assessment were opportunities to lead with increased empathy and flexibility. The unfamiliar nature of operating in the midst of a pandemic also required fresh data from students, faculty, and staff. Empathy and timeliness in our communications were essential in supporting our institution.

Our approach to learning outcomes assessment practice in the midst of the pandemic is best summarized: “Ongoing program learning outcomes assessment is important, but it is not the most important thing right now.” Knowing that our faculty value assessment, we could adjust the “normal pace” of assessment activities without them getting lost in the shuffle. In fact, the immediate assessment issues were logistics and timing, not lack of desire or interest. For example, external review visits for program reviews became impossible due to travel restrictions and health guidelines. Faculty who worked on program reviews were disappointed to lose external reviewers’ insights, so we decided to postpone these visits until the fall. As in-person visits continue to be impossible, we are arranging virtual visits utilizing conference calls and classroom observations via Zoom for this fall. In order to support these visits a Guide to Remote External Review Visits was created and shared with department chairs.

Proceeding with 2020-2021 program reviews was also uncertain. We approached this uncertainty by providing clear communication, context, and organization for the relevant department chairs and deans. The conversations concerning program reviews acknowledged the overwhelming workload for faculty, as we prepared for a Hybrid-Flexible (“hy-flex”) model of instruction for fall 2020 courses (which allows for both in-person and online teaching simultaneously, giving students the flexibility to attend classes online if they cannot return to campus). Our communication was consistently honest, understanding, and service-oriented. We had one-on-one conversations with deans and department chairs in which we emphasized our role as partners who are here to serve them. For example, we offered more hands-on support by attending and facilitating each faculty meeting where they would discuss the program review questions, to alleviate the department chair’s workload. To our delight, each conversation ended with a decision to proceed with program reviews in 2020-2021 and a shift to view this as an opportunity to engage in meaningful reflection and improvement of students’ learning experiences, especially in light of the pandemic.

Completion of program learning outcome (PLO) assessment reporting was another pressing matter. We were unsure of how the atypical learning experience would impact annual PLO assessment. However, our Educational Effectiveness Committee, composed of faculty assessment experts from across the institution, agreed that most programs would not need to significantly alter signature assignments and thus would continue to collect relevant data for PLO assessment. Since assessment not only requires data collection, but also faculty discussion and reflection, we decided to maintain our annual deadline for PLO assessment reports for departments who were able to meet it, while also providing a secondary deadline in the fall for more flexibility.

These decisions were shared with faculty through email reminders and follow-up conversations that emphasized flexibility and understanding. Department chairs and other faculty assessment leaders were reminded of the usual deadline for assessment reporting and offered additional support:

First Email

Dear Dept. Chairs and Program Directors,

This is a friendly reminder that your program's Annual PLO Assessment Report is due on or before June 30. During these unusual circumstances, your assessment findings may also be unique. They are still valuable! I know many of you have already engaged in discussion on the learning that occurred this spring, and will continue into the fall. I hope the annual PLO assessment provides another opportunity to do so.

I completely understand that there may have been barriers to completing your PLO assessment this year. If this is the case for you, please email me as soon as possible to discuss further. Also, feel free to visit the Educational Effectiveness website for resources and the new template. If you ever have questions or need support with assessment practice and/or process, please do not hesitate to reach out. (E. Soto, email communication, June 11, 2020)

Second Email

I hope this email finds you well and in good health! I'm writing from the Office of Educational Effectiveness regarding your 2019-2020 Annual PLO Assessment Report because our office has not yet received a report for [your program].

This year we are offering a second due date of September 30, which we hope will provide you with the much needed additional time to engage in assessment activities with your Faculty... If you are unsure of how to proceed with PLO assessment for this unprecedented year or cannot reasonably submit your report by the deadline, please contact [us] so we may assist you. (J. Smith, email communication, August 3, 2020)

We also were involved in the institution's reopening team as we planned for the reopening of our campus and the aforementioned Hybrid-Flexible model. Faculty groups were tasked with creatively addressing the teaching and learning experience in this new format. It was later decided that we would remain closed in the fall in accordance with our state and county guidelines. However, involvement on the team provided an opportunity to share perspective on how this unique time could be especially useful to understand and improve important issues, such as equity, within the student learning experience.

Conversations with the reopening teams addressed our students' varying needs for effective learning, self-care, mental health, home life, internet access and connection. Concerns regarding attendance in synchronous class sessions and the potential for cheating during online exams needed to be addressed as some students did not have a quiet place to connect to the internet and engage in class discussion or exams. A set of guidelines was produced and shared in order to address these concerns with a focus on overall student engagement and alternative forms of assessment. We encouraged faculty to consider "attendance" as engagement beyond a student's presence in a physical or virtual classroom and reserve

awarding points for activities that contribute to students' learning and progression towards learning outcomes. We suggested a modified approach to attendance: monitor student engagement by naming specific activities and criteria by which a student could demonstrate they are effectively engaging in the learning experience. Those activities include but are not limited to: frequency of log-ins into Canvas, participation in discussions threads, conferences, small groups, touchpoints or meeting sessions with the faculty, and low-stakes learning activities and assessments (e.g. short assignments, quizzes, meta-cognitive reflection questions, etc.). We reminded the faculty that exams and other assessment tools should be used to measure and reflect student engagement with the course learning outcomes and reinforce learning (and that concerns regarding exams in a remote setting might best be solved by reconsidering the assessment tool being utilized). These conversations were productive and useful, as we saw many faculty adopt the guidelines and implement innovative or new-to-them techniques in teaching and learning.

While assessment and accreditation are the main responsibilities of our office, we also support decision-making through institution-wide surveys of students and faculty. In response to the pivot to remote instruction in spring 2020, we were asked to develop and analyze three surveys: a faculty/staff morale survey, a student success and wellness survey, and an end-of-term reflection/survey for faculty. As the main hub for internal survey research, we were sensitive to survey fatigue and strategically timed these surveys with consideration of the initial shift to remote learning, finals, and grading periods.

We first developed the Faculty and Staff Support and Morale Survey in late March 2020 in partnership with the Office of Faculty Advancement and Human Resources, to monitor the well-being of faculty and staff during the abrupt transition to working from home. The survey included closed and open-ended questions. Our office analyzed the data from the survey and findings were shared with all faculty and staff during an all-employee webcast.

Then, we developed our Student Success and Wellness Survey in partnership with the offices of Student Success, Student Wellness, and Faculty Advancement. This survey, sent to undergraduate and graduate students in early April 2020, provided our student support service offices with real-time feedback about the learning experience, mindset and needs of our students. It also gave students space to describe their experiences in their own words.

Finally, Faculty Advancement and Educational Effectiveness partnered again to develop and analyze a survey administered to all of our faculty. The purposes of the survey were threefold: 1) provide space for faculty to reflect on lessons learned as a result of the mid-semester shift to remote delivery, which will also help us prepare for and implement an effective remote teaching and learning experience in the future; 2) better understand the emerging and ongoing needs of faculty and provide relevant support as they prepared for the fall 2020 term; and 3) provide faculty with a record of their guided reflection responses that they may include in the optional teaching narrative that accompanies promotion/tenure materials.

We were sensitive to surveying faculty again, as many had participated in the Faculty and Staff Support and Morale Survey. However, it was determined that the unique focus on teaching practice and potential helpfulness for faculty made it worthwhile. This survey was administered in mid-June 2020, after the end of the semester and grading period in recognition of the difficulty of the semester and need for margin to reflect on one's experiences. While participation was understandably low and generalizability was

limited, we were encouraged by the insight into how faculty approached the shift to remote learning and some indirect evidence of student achievement.

Overall, we learned that communicating with timeliness, clarity and a focus on serving and partnering with others, even while managing multiple responsibilities, allowed us to effectively support the overall well-being of our students and colleagues. In the midst of the pandemic, a posture of flexibility, empathy and service proved to be key components in meeting the needs of our campus, which we will take with us into the future.

About the Authors

Eileen Soto, M.A.Ed. is the Director of Educational Effectiveness in the Office of Educational Effectiveness at Biola University. She can be reached at eileen.soto@biola.edu.

Jamie Smith, Ed.D. is an Academic Researcher in the Office of Educational Effectiveness at Biola University. She can be reached at jamie.d.smith@biola.edu.