

Silver Linings from a Challenging Situation

By Elise Demeter, Christine Robinson, Mitchel L. Cottenoir, Harriet Hobbs, and Karen E. Singer-Freeman

The University of North Carolina at Charlotte (UNC Charlotte) is an urban, four-year, public institution serving over 30,000 students. UNC Charlotte is nationally recognized for improving degree completion rates (Association of Public and Land-grant Universities, 2019) and for assessment (Excellence in Assessment designee 2018; Robinson et al., 2019). We centrally oversee assessment of student learning through our roles in the Office of Assessment and Accreditation (OAA). Assessment is additionally supported by College Assessment Directors (CADs) housed within each of our colleges, who engage with faculty in compiling, reviewing, and monitoring program-level outcomes. Like other institutions, UNC Charlotte was caught off-guard by the COVID-19 pandemic and scrambled to move instruction online to comply with our state's stay-at-home order in mid-March, 2020.

The shift to remote teaching impacted UNC Charlotte's ability to measure student learning at the course, program, and institutional levels. At the course level, instructional faculty had broad latitude to pare down assessments to the minimum needed to demonstrate students' attainment of course competencies. To support faculty efforts, OAA offered webinars on remote assessment strategies in collaboration with our Center for Teaching & Learning (UNC Charlotte CTL Media, 2020). Our CADs also supported faculty in modifying assessments, including helping faculty brainstorm what elements of existing plans might be salvageable. For instance, teacher candidates in our College of Education courses could no longer implement a lesson in a K-12 classroom as schools were closed. However, the candidates could write lesson plans and reflect on possible implementation challenges, allowing demonstration of many of the desired learning outcomes. Through conversations with faculty, we learned faculty teaching fine or performing arts and STEM laboratory courses had an especially acute need for assessment resources. In response, OAA identified accessible and adaptable resources for implementing alternative assessment strategies for these disciplines and others. We created a webpage with a curated list of annotated resources organized by content area so faculty could easily pinpoint relevant resources (UNC Charlotte Office of Assessment and Accreditation, 2020).

Tracking the rapidly unfolding, campus-wide changes in the course assignments used to assess student learning posed big challenges for our program assessment practices. OAA worked with CADs to create new forms and systems to document changes and identify newly emerging gaps between original assessment plans and what was actually implemented. These solutions will aid in maintaining continuity in 2020 and 2021 annual reports. Our Spring 2020 program assessment reporting deadlines were also substantially extended in sensitivity to increased faculty workloads and personal challenges brought on by the pandemic.

The crisis necessitated postponing much of our assessment work at the institutional level. For instance, OAA oversees assessment of our institutional student learning outcomes in effective communication and critical thinking. OAA typically conducts large-scale, in-person testing of students on the ETS HEIghten Written Communication (Rios et al., 2017) and Critical Thinking (Liu et al., 2016) Outcomes Assessment exams. This exam data is combined with survey and embedded assessment data to create holistic pictures of students' attainment of outcomes (Demeter et al., 2019). Postponement of Spring 2020 ETS testing has delayed our ability to robustly assess these important outcomes. Future testing may be conducted remotely online.

For Fall 2020, our local health conditions dictated most of our instruction take place online. We are implementing lessons learned from this past Spring. Based on student feedback (Singer-Freeman et al., 2020), UNC Charlotte required student laptops and expanded resources to help students be successful online learners. Our priorities for in-person instruction include courses where hands-on engagement is most needed, such as the fine and performing arts, STEM laboratories, and clinical classes. While challenges remain as the COVID-19 crisis continues, we are seeing silver linings to this situation that may benefit the assessment of student learning in the long-term.

These include:

- The rapid changes resulted in new relationships between OAA and faculty born of necessity. To sustain these new relationships, OAA will offer future one-on-one consultations and will encourage these faculty to participate in our future workshops, events, and scholarship of assessment summer grant programs.
- Faculty who previously participated in pedagogical professional development reported these experiences eased their transition to online instruction. They possessed a support network and knew they could make changes to their assessment plans that would keep student learning central.
- The adoption of a system for tracking classroom assessment changes is a valuable tool we will continue to use.
- There is concern students may have knowledge or skill gaps resulting from the disruptions caused by the pandemic. We are encouraging faculty to make use of existing curriculum maps and adaptive learning platforms to support continuity of learning.
- Faculty are devoting increased time and energy to designing high-quality online courses with well-conceived assessments. Over 75% of UNC Charlotte faculty members participated in one or more Center for Teaching & Learning workshops between March and September, 2020. Additionally, 360 registrants from UNC Charlotte participated in the UNC System's workshop on designing effective online courses (UNC System Digital Learning Initiative, 2020). This investment will continue to benefit our students after the current crisis passes.

Moving forward, we will certainly learn what other silver linings exist, what new practices we wish to maintain, and we will renew our dedication to serving our students and community.

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