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Putting Assessment into Action: Selected Projects from the First Cohort of the Assessment in Action Grant

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CHAPTER 2

Honor Bound:

Assessing Library Interventions into the Complex Problem of Academic Integrity

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ALIGNED WITH FAIRFIELD UNIVERSITY'S mission to foster student commitment to academic excellence and a sense of social responsibility, the DiMenna-Nyselius Library began a serious exploration of academic integrity in the Fall 2009. The Library has been actively involved since then with Fairfield University's academic integrity initiatives, resulting in the Library's recognition as a leading campus resource on academic integrity. The Library's work is motivated by the belief that academic libraries can be a major contributor to solving the complex problem of academic dishonesty by educating faculty and students through workshops, information literacy classes, and student learning modules. These education efforts focused on issues such as avoiding plagiarism, citing sources and the interdependent responsibilities of both students and faculty. (You can see more details of the DiMenna-Nyselius Library's academic integrity work at <http://librarybestbets.fairfield.edu/academicintegrity/>.)

As part of the DiMenna-Nyselius Library's academic integrity efforts, our librarians developed and implemented two direct instruction modules

for first-year students delivered through Fairfield University's First-Year Experience program:

- **Module 1:** An academic integrity classroom lesson integrated into the First-Year Experience program consisting of assigned readings, guided discussion questions on the readings, classroom activities and a writing prompt assigned for homework.
- **Module 2:** A web-based tutorial *Avoiding Plagiarism Tutorial* designed to educate students about citation rules, tips for avoiding plagiarism, Fairfield University's Honor Code and academic integrity.

Prior to the Assessment in Action (AiA) grant, no formal assessment of the impact of these direct instruction modules on student learning had been undertaken. Our AiA project focused on the assessment of these two instruction modules, with specific emphasis on quantifying their impact on (a) students' understanding of academic integrity, and (b) students' skills for integrating and citing sources in ways that avoid plagiarism.

Partnerships

Since the modules are incorporated into the First Year Experience program, it was vital we include the head of the First Year Experience program on our assessment team. As part of the team, the head of the First Year Experience program was instrumental in coordinating the delivery of the lessons and administering the assessment. Since citing sources and avoiding plagiarism encompass multi-faceted, higher order skills, we invited Fairfield University's Writing Center Director (and an expert on student writing issues) to be part of the team. We also wanted the assessment project to be viewed not only as a library initiative, but also as a contribution to the University's assessment plans and its understanding of its students. Therefore the participation of Associate V-President of Academic Affairs and Assessment in the team placed our work within the larger University's assessment initiatives. All three of these colleagues took part in the Assessment in Action training, participated in the scoring of the assessments and in the compilation of results. Having participation from experts across campus and with differing expertise added great value to the project, linking all of our work together by its impact on student learning and institutional mission.

Assessing Complex Learning

Academic integrity is the cornerstone of learning. While highly valued at every higher education institution, educators do not have universal agreement on the skills and mindsets that make up a person of academic integrity. It is a highly complex concept that defies a check list approach. This complexities led us to question how and even if academic integrity can be assessed. How do we assess the intangible? Can academic integrity be quantified? It is easy to get stymied. We decided that to fully assess this intangible of academic integrity may not be possible, but we can get indications of progress towards achieving this goal of academic integrity.¹

Module 1: Academic Integrity Lesson

The *Academic Integrity Lesson* learning module developed by our librarians and integrated into all First-Year Experience classes consisted of two assigned readings: *Integrity: Academic and Political. A Letter to My Students*² and the Fairfield University Honor Code. It also included corresponding guided discussion questions and group classroom activities. (To see the complete learning module, go to <http://librarybest-bets.fairfield.edu/academicintegrity/firstyear>.) The purpose of the lesson was to discuss and reflect upon issues related to academic integrity in order to promote a University culture of “honesty, trust, fairness, responsibility and courage.”³ The measurement of an intangible University culture of academic integrity was vexing. A meeting with our Director of Institutional Research was particularly helpful in offering these two tips: 1) it is best to use agreed-upon and accepted standards and tools in higher education, and 2) the establishment of clear learning outcomes is essential.

The team felt the American Association of Colleges and Universities’ VALUE (Valid Assessment of Learning in Undergraduate Education) project was an excellent starting point, offering accepted standards and tools. VALUE is a campus-based assessment initiative sponsored by American Association of Colleges and Universities as part of its LEAP initiative that offers 16 rubrics to assess students’ own authentic work⁴ Notably, the American Association of Colleges and Universities’ Ethical Reasoning Rubric from VALUE addresses the difficulties in attempting to assess the

sometimes fluid concept of academic integrity. It points out that “pragmatically it would be difficult, if not impossible, to judge whether or not students would act ethically when faced with real ethical situations. What can be evaluated using a rubric is whether students have the intellectual tools to make ethical choices.”⁵ The VALUE rubrics were a key starting point to clarify our thinking and led our assessment team to consensus on using a rubric tool to assess student learning from the lesson.

Additionally, the selection of a rubric tool as the appropriate method was supported by its recognition as valuable in evaluating subjective work that ranges across a continuum.⁶ A well designed rubric when applied to student work takes subjective judgments and turns them into objective assessments using quantitative scales. We chose a descriptive rubric format. A descriptive rubric has three components: 1) the learning outcomes to be assessed (usually in the first column), 2) the levels of performance (usually numbers across the top row) and 3) the definitions of the quality of the performance (the inside of the table).⁷ While rubrics can be holist or analytic, we chose an analytic rubric that allowed us to examine and assess individual learning outcomes.⁸

The determination of the authentic student work to be assessed flowed from the choice of the descriptive rubric assessment tool. To state this another way, the assessment method came first and then we decided on the type of work to be assessed. The student work assigned was a reflection essay. Our assessment methodology then became an exploratory essay review approach where we looked at a representative sample of essays. This representative sample of 10% of the approximately 950 essays was generated by our Director of Institutional Research, and mirrored the demographics of the larger first-year student population.

A well designed rubric is predicated on clear learning objectives. The development of learning objectives is both intellectually challenging and time consuming. Most important to crafting the learning objectives is to state specific outcomes that can then be assessed. In the learning outcomes developed by the assessment team, clear outcomes are stated and can be demonstrated. See the example below, with use of action verbs such as **IDENTIFY**, **EXPLAIN** and **PROBLEM-SOLVE**.

Learning Objective # 1: First-year students **IDENTIFY** and **EXPLAIN** their academic responsibilities as members of the Fairfield University community.

Learning Objective # 2: First-year students **IDENTIFY** their own behaviors that could contribute to Academic Integrity violations and **PROBLEM-SOLVE** how to act responsibly in their scholarly community.

Once the learning objectives were done, we created a *draft* rubric that quantified the outcomes of the learning objectives with score ranges on a continuum. The draft rubric was then put through a norming process where the team independently tested the rubric using actual essays. The results were then compared through group discussions and changes were made to the rubric. This norming process is vital to creating a well-designed rubric. For those considering developing a rubric, we recommend allotting significant amounts of time for the norming process. Also, we found it was important that everyone participating in the assessment be part of the entire norming process. The group discussions that occur during the norming helps reduce ambiguity during scoring and ultimately saves time and improves confidence in the results.

The team wanted all first-years to go through the lesson and therefore we did not have a control group to use for comparison. To remedy this problem, we used a waiting control group approach. In our case this meant we waited to give 1/2 the group the lesson until *after* both groups had written the essay. So we were able to compare essays from one group who had the lesson to the other group who did not have the lesson.

Module 2: *Avoiding Plagiarism Tutorial*

The online *Avoiding Plagiarism Tutorial* currently being taken by first-years was heavily based on our previous tutorial *Plagiarism Court*, a 2002 PRIMO winner. We knew it needed significant updates and wanted an assessment method that would not only tell us what our first-year students know about plagiarism but would also help us to shape the new plagiarism tutorial. The online tutorial presented information including:

1. Defining plagiarism.
2. Tips on how to avoid plagiarism, such as note taking and paraphrasing.
3. Why citing is important.
4. Specific rules on how to do citations.

This information was displayed in a sequential non-interactive format, followed by a 15 question multiple choice question.

While for some plagiarism is a black and white issue, for many in academia plagiarism is the grayest of areas. What is considered common knowledge by one faculty member is not common to another. What one defines as cheating or copying, another sees as a mistake or a lack of understanding about citations. Plagiarism is “a multi-faceted and ethically complex problem.”⁹ The library’s approach in the plagiarism tutorial is to educate about why we cite, with the idea that “knowing how to understand and synthesize complex, lengthy sources is essential to effective plagiarism prevention.”¹⁰ Avoiding plagiarism requires a developed set of higher-order skills and knowledge. Again, we came back to our concern on the difficulty of assessing highly complex learning. We are not alone in our concerns as a survey of high-quality plagiarism tutorials employed by academic libraries shows that 56% collect no data at all on its effectiveness.¹¹ We concluded no one assessment tool could capture the knowledge about plagiarism and citing rules as well as assess if students were able to apply their knowledge in their own writing. Therefore, our original idea was to split the assessment of the plagiarism tutorial into two parts:

1. **Knowledge:** Do students know the definition of plagiarism? Can students recognize examples of proper paraphrasing? Do students know the basic rules of citation?
2. **Skills:** In an authentic writing assignment, can students demonstrate proper citation techniques? Can they avoid patchwork writing? Can they properly paraphrase?

It became apparent that what amounted to two different assessment projects on the plagiarism tutorial effectiveness was not feasible due to time requirements. It is important to acknowledge here that decisions regarding assessment must be based on practicalities of our own work loads, what is feasible technologically and what we ultimately want to learn from assessment. In that vein, we decided to assess the knowledge portion only because it was less time consuming, could be done with electronic scoring and it would give us more concrete information about the effectiveness of the plagiarism tutorial. Once we decided to assess the knowledge portion, we chose a multiple choice quiz as our assessment method as they are well-suited for testing the recall of knowledge.

Approximately 950 first-year students take the plagiarism tutorial every year. If we wanted to assess the effectiveness of it we could either pick a representative sample or find a way to score all of the students electronically. The grading options in Blackboard include a multiple choice quiz. We decided to move the tutorial into Blackboard, enroll all 950 students into it, and use the grading system in Blackboard to administer and automatically grade the multiple choice quiz. Blackboard allowed us to easily monitor who had and who had not taken the tutorial. The grading options in Blackboard made it the practical choice.

Our next step was to identify the learning objectives of the tutorial. In a recent survey, only 16% of library designed plagiarism tutorials had measurable learning objectives. This is especially problematic as without these objectives, quiz questions do not accurately gauge learning.¹² We crafted six learning objectives for the plagiarism tutorial. The crafting of the learning objectives was done collaboratively by the librarian and the Associate Vice-President of Academic Affairs and Assessment. We highly recommend getting input from at least one other person when crafting learning objectives.

After crafting the six learning objectives, we set criteria that define the acceptable performance for each learning objective. These criteria allowed us to know when we have been successful and when we have not. The next step of writing the multiple choice question that corresponds to the criteria is time consuming and requires a great deal of skill and experience. We repeatedly had to remind ourselves that for each question there should be only one correct or best answer. The other choices should be foils, but foils that seem plausible. In total, we decided to have four choices to choose from, which is fairly standard. One advantage of running a multiple choice quiz through Blackboard is it provides statistics on individual test questions, highlighting questions that might be poor discriminators of student performance. Although we had spent considerable time crafting the questions, Blackboard analysis pointed out that not all our questions were of high-quality and we removed one from the results.

Since one goal was to analyze the effectiveness of the tutorial, we wanted to test our students' knowledge both pre- and post-tutorial. Practical considerations regarding administration precluded this option. To attempt to compensate for this, we administered the pre-test, then the tutorial and then the post-test in one sitting where the pre- and post-test questions

were the same. This was not ideal and we believe the act of taking the test twice in a short time period may have skewed the results. Optimally, we recommend that either a control group be used instead of the pre- and post-testing in one session or the pre- and post-test questions not be the same.

Recommendations

1. Including experts from outside the Library in the assessment project is particularly helpful in executing the assessment project as well as connecting the Library's work with its campus partners and the University's mission.
2. Basing the assessment method on a recognized tool in higher education gives the assessment project credibility outside the Library.
3. Considering work-loads and technological capabilities, be practical on what can be done. Some assessment is better than no assessment.

Notes

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