

Accountability and the value of assessment during COVID-19 instruction

Prior to the pandemic, instruction and assessment at USNA was in-person with similar resources available to all midshipmen. Post spring break 2020 balancing the mission of USNA and the health and safety requirements of a pandemic resulted in significant and multiple changes to teaching and assessment modalities. Amidst issues of validity and the stress of transitioning to teaching/learning (as well as performing service, conducting research, and managing familial responsibilities) during a pandemic, the question has been asked: Is there value in assessment during COVID-19?

The answers to this question are many, but ultimately it is “yes,” there is value in assessment during a crisis perhaps more so than during normal operations. However, as operations are not normal, the assessment program needs to be flexible to both be managed during trying conditions and to continue to provide meaningful information.

Assessment and external stakeholders:

The question of the value of assessment of student learning during COVID has partially been answered by accreditors continuing to emphasize accountability with regard to program quality and continuous improvement even during the rapid changes and uncertainty of the pandemic. Further, USNA external stakeholders have also inquired regarding our ability to effectively deliver our educational programs. Assessment can be used to answer these inquiries.

Assessment and internal stakeholders:

Assessment (conducted in a meaningful and manageable fashion) may also be the answer to questions from internal constituents. Midshipmen may be wondering: What am I supposed to be learning and how am I doing? Instructors may ask: What is the current effectiveness of instruction? What adjustments may need to be made in follow-on courses? And finally, when this period of flux is behind us many are trying to determine how many of our current innovations will carry forward?

With less, and in many ways degraded, face to face interaction and possibly less informal feedback, midshipmen may have questions about their ability to learn, or even knowing what to learn. Often, formal assessments at USNA have relied on summative high-stakes moments (final exams and papers). However, given the varied teaching and learning modalities, midshipmen more than ever need clear expectations as well as timely and constructive formative assessments that help them monitor their own progress. Periodic assessments with clearly defined learning objectives (be they problem sets, knowledge checks, short written responses, online polls, or [classroom and learning assessment techniques](#) like muddiest point or exit tickets) can be used to quickly provide information about midshipman knowledge that can be used to direct further instruction and learning (in the class or independently). Additionally assessment activities can be useful for keeping students on track in on-line classes where students are more likely to be distracted. Moreover, if the assessments are systematically collected and aligned with learning outcomes then it is quite likely that they can also be used for annual reporting purposes.

Conclusion:

In combination with their own expertise and good sense, instructors will need to use reasonably accurate assessments to compare achievement against expectations and identify if midshipman ability is less than expected. Using qualitative and quantitative assessments of the learning outcomes and curriculum maps, instructors can identify where diminished proficiency of a learning outcome is likely to impact future learning and how it can be remediated, be it in future courses, in partnership with the Center for Academic Excellence, or the sharing of out of class resources for individual self-assessment and practice.

Arguably the need for assessment of how midshipmen are doing is greater now than during “normal” semesters just as the challenges are also greater. Even with nearly all midshipmen back at USNA there continues to be a need for flexible assessments that can be used to come to conclusions about academic performance and next steps. Therefore, we cannot waive the assessment requirement, but the assessment program does need to be adaptable to be managed and provide meaningful information given the external realities.

Resources:

Angelo, T. A., Cross, K. P., (1993). *Classroom Assessment Techniques: A Handbook for College Teachers*, 2nd Ed. Jossey-Bass, San Francisco

Barkley, E.F., Howell Major, C., (2016). *Learning assessment techniques: A handbook for college faculty*. Jossey-Bass, San Francisco.