Electronic Assessment: Impact on Teaching and Learning

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Saint Leo University is a Catholic, liberal-arts, teaching university of international consequence. Saint Leo University was founded in 1889 by the Order of Saint Benedict of Florida. It is a Catholic, coeducational liberal arts-based university located 30 miles north of Tampa. Saint Leo is accredited by the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools and offers Associate’s, Bachelor’s, Master’s and Specialist’s Degrees.

With a main campus of 1,700 students, Saint Leo has the majority of its students enrolled in online or in the regional campuses located in Florida, Georgia, South Carolina, Texas, California, and Virginia. The University ranks as the sixth largest provider of higher education to military personnel in the United States.

The University’s initial teacher preparation programs are fully approved by the Florida Department of Education and are offered in regional centers throughout the northern and central part of the state. Administrative regional centers are located in Ocala, Gainesville, Lake City, and Palatka. Offices also offering the programs are in Lecanto, Leesburg, Madison, Trenton, Orange Park, and Jacksonville. One terminally degreed faculty is located at each administrative center to advise students, teach classes, and manage the programs. Graduate education programs are offered online and at University Campus, Ocala, Palatka, Lake City, Jacksonville and Lakeland. Because we are offering programs at many locations, challenges are inherent in the demographics and dependence on adjuncts.

Previously we have used a paper-based portfolio system, in which students selected artifacts they believed met the required standards. Implementing electronic portfolios has changed the traditional definition of ‘portfolio.’ The combination of numerical scoring and statistical analysis allows for data to be aggregated and used for assessment purposes (Barrett, 1997).

The Individual Accomplished Practices Assessment System (IAPAS) was developed in response to state expectations for teacher education programs and is used in our undergraduate and graduate initial certification programs. Faculty members designed the system to measure state-mandated teacher preparation standards. We have a parallel system for use in our principal preparation program as well.

The process of this assessment system is based upon the use of course-embedded assessments, which are graded with standard syllabi with individual criteria that are linked to state standards. Once assignments are complete, the student uploads them to the online system. The faculty member then grades the assignment with the standard rubric and transfers data from the rubric to the assessment system.

The design has minimized impact on faculty members so they can stay focused on teaching and on students so that they can stay focused on learning. The time-intensive work is completed by personnel in the Program Approval Office, where all assignments are created in the system by course each semester. The institution made the commitment
to this approach by hiring a full-time analyst to work on this process, thus showing the desire to promoted the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL).

The data obtained through this system can be disaggregated by student to determine progression toward mastery. This closes the loop for individual assessment. Data can be disaggregated by course to assist with continuous improvement. This helps program faculty determine how to change the curriculum to better meet student learning needs. Lastly, data can be disaggregated by instructor to identify strengths and areas for improvement or training. The ability to use data in so many ways strengthens our program and ultimately should increase student learning.

As we work toward this goal, we realize that this change process from a portfolio to an electronic assessment system is one that has to be supported and guided by university administration. A change leader establishes direction and vision for the future. He/she aligns people by communicating direction in words and deeds. A motivating and inspiring leader energizes people during the change process to help them overcome any foreseen and unforeseen barriers.

Collins (2001) provides a framework and rationale to move from good to great. He indicates that success is not enough and that leaders strive to greatness. The IAPAS system was conceived because of state mandates, but the foundation and future of the system will allow our education programs to move from good to great with continuous assessments, reporting, and analysis.

Faculty and adjuncts who are involved in the change from a paper-based portfolio to an electronic, interactive system are encouraged to support the change process by acknowledging the challenges and asking for help. The leadership team believes that personal responsibility is vital in this process because “The only thing you can personally control about change is your reaction to it,” (University of Notre Dame, Office of Human Resources, 2005). Negativity only erodes the process and creates barriers.

During this process of change, several challenges became apparent. First of all, not all adjuncts, full time faculty or students had the basic knowledge of technology necessary to use the system. Training was provided prior to and during implementation for all users. Another challenge was some resistance by students to pay the access fees for the system. These students were reminded that similar costs were incurred by former students preparing paper-based portfolios. Other challenges arose during the semester including grading issues and ensuring data input completion prior to the end of the semester. These were addressed on an individual basis.

In order to improve future practice and to encourage feedback, a survey was distributed to all faculty and students. The first question asked students how many hours per week they had spent submitting assignments and asked faculty how many hours per week they had spent grading assignments in IAPAS. Most responses indicated that students and faculty spent less than one hour submitting and grading assignments, but a significant number spent between one and two hours. Student comments about unclear instructions, the length of time it took to upload assignments, and the steps to uploading assignments support the need for additional training.

The second and third questions on the survey focused on uploading and grading documents in the system. Students and faculty found their first experience with uploading and grading documents to be mildly challenging. Similar results were
connected to the last assignment that was uploaded and graded. Results indicated the process was easier with experience.

The fourth question on the survey asked students and faculty to select the main purpose for implementing IAPAS. Most were able to correctly identify the purpose as “to track mastery of state required standards.” However, many thought that the purpose was to document completion of coursework. Obviously, there is some work still to be done in this area.

The last question on the survey asked if participants thought IAPAS will make our students better teachers. Not surprisingly, almost all respondents indicated they did not think this would improve teaching. However, only time will tell how this assessment system impacts overall achievement of skills and whether it will move the programs from good to great.

Based on these survey results, some conclusions can be made. The majority of students and faculty understand the purpose of IAPAS. Additional training is needed. It is not time intensive to upload and grade documents in this system and the process became easier with practice.

As IAPAS was implemented system-wide, we attempted to engage in the SoTL process and to respond to these specific student and faculty needs. Originally, training materials were available via an online link to a video and via a Word document providing a step-by-step list of directions. We realized that very few new users of the system were accessing the video and that visual learners needed more assistance. In response to this need, a PowerPoint presentation was created that includes screen shots of each step, with graphics to guide students and faculty through the process. Additionally, we added a general statement to each master syllabus prior to implementing the system.

Because of this study and this initiative, there are some implications for the future. We see the need for focused faculty development specific to individual and/or program issues. We believe the IAPAS system will enable us to track student achievement, to impact learning, and to heighten students’ awareness of their individual academic needs. We believe that maintaining high expectations for students, faculty and adjuncts will promote greater academic and institutional success.
References


