

Radford University and DIA: A Competency-Based Approach to Assessing General Education

Context

Radford University is a mid-sized public university located in southwestern Virginia. Over the last several years, they have been developing an innovative, competency-based approach to general education. Their REAL Curriculum employs a distinctive approach by identifying the development of learning competency within majors and minors and maximizing the utility of credit hours by cross crediting. The new curriculum asks students to assemble a program of study in four broad and important areas: quantitative and scientific reasoning, humanistic or artistic expression, cultural or behavioral analysis, and applied learning.

REAL's emphasis on competency necessitated expertise in assessment that exceeded what was available on campus. The REAL Assessment Committee needed a campus-wide tool to identify competency in each of the four key domains, and while department-level assessment initiatives had been successful in the past, the Committee knew they needed more in order for REAL to be successful.

Radford came to DIA seeking both expertise in assessment development and a willingness to design an approach that was customized to campus needs and curriculum. According to Dr. Nicole Hendrix, Radford's Assistant Provost for Undergraduate Education, this work grew and changed over time: "The approach taken by DIA evolved as our needs changed and helped our entire team move forward and build capacity to support efforts in the future. An external perspective was invaluable in helping to assuage internal conflict and develop confidence in our approach."

Collaboration

Beginning in late 2020, the collaboration focused on three major goals:

1. **Item Writing:** While Radford had a group of faculty members who were ready, willing, and able to contribute to the assessment development, formal training in item writing was needed to contextualize their efforts within the needs of the REAL curriculum;
2. **Assessment Development:** Once those items were written, they needed to be organized and synthesized into operational assessments;
3. **Assessment Implementation:** Once full versions of the REAL assessments were created, Radford needed guidance to determine when, where, how, and with whom the assessments were to be administered in order to effectively assess the REAL curriculum.

The Work

This work took many forms. DIA developed training for faculty and staff, created operational versions of each assessment, and developed processes for handling many of the psychometric needs of the assessment model as a whole.

According to Dr. Hendrix, “The experience was outstanding. DIA was able to anticipate problems, adjust as our needs evolved, and help us meet our goals... DIA staff were knowledgeable and skilled, but also very adept at supporting the human and cultural elements of assessment. It gave our faculty and administration confidence in the process by helping build capacity of our team and supporting the work in ways that helped our project move forward.”



Nicole Hendrix, Ph.D.
Assistant Provost for Undergraduate
Education at Radford University

The Results

It has been said that assessment is a process, not a thing. Indeed, the results of this collaboration show that. While DIA and Radford collaborated to create assessments for the REAL Curriculum, there is still work ahead to continue the assessment and evaluation of student learning.

That being said, Radford has a strong foundation for these next steps. According to Dr. Hendrix, “The most significant outcome of our partnership is the team’s confidence in our instruments and plan for assessment of incoming students... Our team has a strong, data tested approach to assessment for our new curriculum. We have instruments that can evolve to meet the needs of our campus and our students.”