ENHANCING ASSESSMENT PLANNING IN AN EDUCATOR PREPARATION PROGRAM FOR FLEXIBILITY AND COMPLIANCE

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Abstract

The case study illustrates an Educator Preparation Program's (EPP) move away from compliance driven data and toward authentic assessment of students. Challenges and state initiatives are discussed as well as proposed implementation of project-based learning and portfolios.

Keywords: *Educator Preparation Program; authentic assessment; project-based learning*

The Program

Educational Diagnosticians are professionals that serve public school students by providing assessment for special education services or ADA 504 accommodation plans. Educational Diagnosticians complete cognitive, achievement, and adaptive evaluations for people age 2 to 22 years of age. They evaluate and identify disabilities such as autism, intellectual and learning disabilities. In addition to K-12 public schools, they can work in colleges, hospitals or other community agencies.

Sul Ross State University serves the Big Bend region of West Texas. SRSU's Educational Diagnostician Educator Preparation Program (EPP) serves graduate students throughout the State of Texas with its online program.   Graduate students complete a credential and master's degree as part of the Educational Diagnostician EPP. Students in the program are mid-career professionals with initial teaching certification. Typically, they continue with their district of current employment after graduation, but they may seek new employment as well.

Prior to 2019, efficacy of the Educational Diagnostician EPP was measured by state examination pass rates. The plan left little flexibility in the assessment plan to focus on authentic methods of assessing student learning and growth. It was determined that assessment needed to occur earlier, more frequently and provide flexibility. It was also determined that evaluation of pass rates of professional exams were not enough to measure efficacy of the program. Based upon the confluence of changes that were occurring with higher education policy, the Educational Diagnostician EPP undertook a new assessment plan.

Beginning the Change

In 2019, Texas Educational Agency (TEA) proposed new professional competencies for beginning Educational Diagnosticians. New standards resulted in a new professional exam. TEA competencies are specific to the field, and examples of competencies include psychometrics, progress monitoring, legal compliance, and administrative duties. EPP courses were realigned with the new competencies. An alignment of courses resulted in the creation of new learning objectives and therefore a need for new assessment of the achievement of the objectives.

In addition to the new professional competencies, Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board (THECB) launched a new plan for the state called the 60x30TX Texas Higher Education Strategic Plan (THECB, 2015). The plan emphasized infusing marketable "soft skills" in the curriculum, transferable skills that can generalize to any career. Skills such as technical writing, advocacy, and oral speaking were the focus for the program's transferable skills and were infused into projects for every course.

School district need was also considered in the new assessment plan. Resources such as mentorship and support of first year diagnosticians vary widely among districts. Typically, larger urban districts are able to offer greater support and greater resources in comparison to smaller rural counterparts. This results in new diagnosticians employed in smaller rural areas standing alone in their practice with little support and collaboration with peers. All EPP courses were tailored to apply project-based learning to the unique needs of the local school the student. By providing district-specific coursework opportunities, smaller districts received qualified graduates ready to respond to their specific needs.

Implementing the Evaluation

The new assessment plan for the Educational Diagnostician EPP is a qualitative evaluation framework. The assessment plan utilizes the overarching goals of project-based learning, marketable "soft" skills, and clear links between learning objectives and professional competencies. This provides an opportunity to analyze data that is beyond professional exam pass-rates. It is three-fold: a project-based summative assessment for each course, two formative assessments of a project-based activity that built toward a summative project and a program capstone project which incorporates the summative projects. Summative projects are housed in a cloud portfolio. Marketable skills such as oral presentation, analytic skills and technical writing are also integrated into formative, summative and the capstone project. Students are assessed on these skills as well as the content of their projects. To assure continuity throughout the program, a matrix is utilized to assure alignment of student learning objectives with the new TEA professional competencies.

Qualitative assessment provides flexibility to address the needs of a dynamic student population. Due to the program being offered online, the student population is diverse representing rural, urban and suburban districts. Student experience is also varied (e.g. certification level, district practices). Therefore, the focus of the assessment framework is individual student growth rather than individual comparison against the expectations of the program. Students are evaluated within self-directed learning opportunities. Some are challenged with enriching opportunities. Others are challenged with attaining proficiency of a competency. All can be evaluated based upon the qualitative assessment in place.

Artifacts

At the core of the program evaluation plan is a unit known as the artifact. Artifacts are project-based assignments. Artifacts are part of formative assessment, summative assessment and the program capstone project, the portfolio defense. The assessment of the artifact involves a rubric. The rubric is developed ahead of time and serves as a roadmap for expectation with the students.   The rubric provides clear reference for assessment and reduces subjective interpretation.

Formative Assessments

Each course in the EPP has two artifacts, each yielding a formative assessment. These artifacts are projects that build toward the summative project. Formative assignments provide opportunities for feedback and editing. Students receive peer and faculty feedback to improve and work toward a successful summative artifact. Examples of work are embedded within courses with rubrics available. Once the student has satisfactory formative assessments, they are able to proceed and incorporate formative components into a larger artifact that is evaluated based upon a summative assessment.

Summative Assessment

The summative assessment for each course is of an artifact that represents cumulative efforts for the semester. These artifacts address the learning objectives for the course. Typical artifacts for summative assessment are student-constructed case studies. Case studies cover varying degrees of psychoeducational evaluation and intervention. Students are required to administer different types of psychoeducational assessment throughout the program which cover formal or informal testing dependent on the course. Examples of informal assessment are functional behavior assessment (FBA), informal academic assessment, or screenings. Formal testing examples are standardized psychometric testing that would measure cognitive, achievement or adaptive skills.

Peer Review

Artifacts are assessed by the instructor but also peer reviewed. Student peer review exposes students to diversity that they would not normally have access to in their local districts. Presenting to peers, provides opportunities for all students in the course to compare practices associated with cultural diversity, second language issues, rural or urban environments, age and grade level. In addition to satisfying learning objectives, students are able to see the variety of methods and considerations involved with special education evaluation around the State of Texas. Artifacts are typically case studies and combined with the psychoeducational evaluation process. The artifacts produced are unique in the demographics they represent (e.g. rural, age, disability). For example, students complete a battery of tests on a child and provide their analysis of the child's performance in a technical report. The report provides unique information about demographics of the test subject, unique testing considerations and analysis.   A comparison between artifacts opens discussion and scope of understanding for best practices.

Portfolio Assessment

Summative assessments are incorporated into a larger portfolio representing the body of work throughout the program. Students provide an oral defense in their last semester with the program. In the oral defense, students utilize the summative artifacts as well as incorporate their practicum experiences.

Students again are not only evaluated on the content of their presentation but on their analytical, oral and technical application skills. Because the program's assessment plan did not adhere to a "one size fits all" format, portfolios reflected personalized learning opportunities while still satisfying professional competencies.

Benefits after the program

Since implementing project-based learning and portfolio assessments, feedback from students and faculty has been positive. The program assessment plan recently went through the peer review process that was required for all university programs. Feedback from university peer review of the EPP's assessment plan stated the program was a model for other programs, specifically citing logical connections between assessment results and student learning outcomes.
Students reported a firmer understanding of the competencies of a beginning diagnostician after program completion. They appreciated the frequent feedback which provided an opportunity to hone their skills in more than one course. By doing so, they reached proficiency in skills earlier than expected. Some students reported that the portfolio provided a good foundation for interviewing with districts.

Faculty reported improved performance as well. The EPP faculty committee for portfolio defense reported richer final presentations by students. There was an increase in commended performance (highest possible) compared to previous cohorts that did not use artifacts as part of their portfolio defense. Additionally, the defense provided evidence of marketable skills such as statistical analysis, technical writing and proficiency with oral presentations.
In addition to student and faculty feedback, quantifiable data was relied upon. Students received higher baseline practice exam scores in comparison to previous cohorts. Additionally, for the 2021-2022 school year the program enjoyed a 100% pass rate of all students taking the professional exam compared to 75% pass rate two years prior.

Recommendations

Some key steps are recommended for programs interested in this model. First, evaluate the core learning objectives for each course in the program. Create a summative project that represents adherence to the leaning objectives of each course. Once a summative project is established, create smaller formative assessments within the course that allow for feedback and growth toward the final summative project. Feedback for formative assessments can be from peers as well as from the instructor. Creation of rubrics are vital for formative assessments to steer clear of generic, "Good job," responses. Examples of summative projects should also be provided for each course. Once each summative project is completed for a course, students are encouraged to house their projects in a university cloud server to access for their capstone project, the portfolio defense, which occurs during the final semester. Students then use the summative projects as examples toward meeting their professional competencies for their oral defense. The portfolio defense occurs in front of a committee in our instance, practicing educational diagnosticians.

With the preliminary success, the plan is to continue using the qualitative assessment model as a primary means of assessment. The suggested key steps are beginning steps for EPPs and can be molded to fit any program. Our experience has shown that EPPs can find balance not only satisfying state competencies but providing personal and relevant outcomes for their students.