



Los Angeles Valley College

Student Learning Outcomes Newsletter

December 2007

SLO Update

The SLO goals for the Academic Affairs side of the house this semester were to:

- 1) identify SLO representatives for all 96 subjects on campus
- 2) train someone in every subject on SLOs
- 3) have the faculty in each subject develop an SLO plan for how they would accomplish writing SLOs for all their courses and programs over the next two years.

We are making excellent progress on our first two goals! An SLO representative has been identified for almost every subject and close to 80% of subjects have at least one person who has received training - and we're not quite done with the semester yet. Although the STARS SLO trainings are all completed, they will be rerun on different days and times in the spring. And, as always, feel free to contact the SLO Coordinator, Rebecca Stein, to arrange for individual or group training for you and/or your colleagues.

If you haven't already submitted an SLO Plan, please work with your Dean and the SLO Coordinator to complete this important step.

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Remember Opening Day?

On Opening Day, many of us discussed the theme of "Building Scholarship and Success from Within". As part of that breakout, we asked people to respond to several questions, including:

- What do you want your students to learn from your classes (at a very general level)?
- How can we help students achieve those learning goals?

To find out what was said on those topics, see the article starting on pg 2.

Why SLOs?

A frequently asked question in regards to SLOs is why we are doing them at all. Although the short answer is "in response to new accreditation standards and to improve student learning" the full response involves understanding what has happened at the state and federal level to lead to the new standards. See page 4 for the long answer to "Why SLOs?"



What Do We Want Students to Learn and How Can We Help Them?

When participants in the Opening Day session were asked what they most wanted their students to learn at a very general level, most responses fell into the following categories:

- Critical thinking
- Communication skills/how to express themselves
- Practical applications/how material relates to real life
- How to learn/study skills
- Lifelong learning/passion for learning
- Commitment and responsibility
- To believe in themselves/have self-confidence

Most of these are incorporated into our mission and vision statements, our general education (GE) outcomes, and the Basic Skills Initiative (all of which are currently being revised and all of which will be discussed in more detail in an SLO newsletter next semester).

The current mission statement of the college incorporates not only critical thinking, but also lifelong learning and the connection to future job skills. The last sentence currently reads, "Embedded in these programs are the greater goals of critical thinking and lifelong learning which are necessary for success in the work place and for furthering one's education and personal development." Communication skills, study skills, and to some extent reasoning skills, are all part of the new Basic Skills/Student Success Initiative.

The main place we should be looking for these general desired outcomes for students is in our GE outcomes. In fact, many of the above themes can be found in our proposed GE outcomes. The draft statements for the outcomes are:

- 1) Reasoning Skills - Students will be able to collect accurate information, evaluate the quality of the information obtained, and analyze, synthesize and organize the information.
- 2) Communication Skills - Students will be able to clearly express, transmit, and interpret knowledge and ideas through writing, speaking, listening and reading.
- 3) Global Awareness - Students will be able to assess how the world has been and continues to be shaped by natural, social and cultural processes and evaluate how these processes provide a context for their own interactions.
- 4) Social Responsibility and Personal Development - Students will be able to take responsibility for their own actions and well-being, make ethical decisions in complex situations, and participate actively in a diverse society.

As we begin to assess these outcomes, we will see how well our students actually are learning these and will discuss and implement ways we can improve teaching and learning in these areas. To begin the discussion, participants in the Opening Day session were asked what we can do to help students achieve these learning goals. The responses included:

- Assessing students' entry level skills and learning style
- Giving students study tools and skills
- Tutoring
- Advising students/having a counselor for each department
- Ensuring attendance and frequent feedback through quizzes
- Providing a clear syllabus and clear expectations
- Showing a clear connection between classes, programs and jobs
- Having more hands-on activities and discussions
- Using technology
- Interacting more with students/less lecture, more interaction and involvement
- Being more accessible to students
- Generating excitement/motivating students
- Having compassion and respect for students
- Staying current in the field

In the spring semester, our goals include completing the revision of the mission and vision statements and the GE outcomes, and to begin the cycle of assessment and improvement in these areas. If you have any thoughts about these topics, please contact the SLO Steering Committee or the SLO Coordinator!



Why SLOs?

A frequently asked question in regards to SLOs is why we are doing them at all. Although the short answer is “in response to new accreditation standards” the full response involves understanding what has happened at the state and federal level to lead to the new standards.

At the Fall 2007 Plenary Session of the Academic Senate for California Community Colleges, a resolution was passed to adopt a paper and recommendations concerning SLO Coordinators (*Agents of Change: Examining The Role of Student Learning Outcomes and Assessment Coordinators in California Community Colleges* written by the Accreditation and Student Learning Outcomes Committee). The Literature Review and Background sections of this paper give a good answer to the "Why SLOs" question, so I have included them in this month's newsletter. The text of the entire paper is available online at the Senate website (<http://www.asccc.org/>).

AGENTS OF CHANGE: EXAMINING THE ROLE OF STUDENT LEARNING
OUTCOMES AND ASSESSMENT COORDINATORS IN CALIFORNIA
COMMUNITY COLLEGES

The Academic Senate for California Community Colleges

Janet Fulks, Bakersfield College, Chair Ad Hoc Accreditation and Student
Learning Outcomes Committee 2007-08, et al

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Literature Review

The Accrediting Commission for Community and Junior Colleges (ACCJC), Western Association of Schools and Colleges (WASC) *2002 Accreditation Standards* integrate outcomes and assessment into every component of institutional responsibility. Recent accreditation actions, found at the ACCJC WASC website (http://www.accjc.org/Actions_institutions.htm), make it perfectly clear; **an institution cannot be accredited without thoughtfully addressing and using outcomes assessment in every course, program and student service.**

In addition, evidence from outcomes assessment is supposed to drive budgeting decisions, address student needs, improve student services and help students and faculty to continually ask, “Can we do this any better?”

A secondary consequence to the focus on outcomes assessment is that it forces the institution to clearly document what the results of a student’s education should be. In other words, what can a student do after he or she completes a course of study? What will a student, holding a degree from a particular program at a particular institution, really be able to do and how do we know he or she can do it? This type of questioning ultimately asks whether a degree, the grades from courses to accomplish that degree, and the time and money spent in the classroom to support that education, actually resulted in any qualitative difference. This corollary of outcomes assessment embodies a public and legislative desire for accountability. There is a body of literature that concludes that higher education has not been accountable or effective. This premise was first documented and publicized in a paper by the National Commission on Excellence in Education called *A Nation at Risk: The Imperative for Educational Reform* (1983). The report has formed the basis of many external pressures upon educational practices. Accreditation practices are supposed to guarantee quality education, but since *A Nation at Risk*, the public and the legislature feel the process is inadequate and have published several attacks on the quality of higher education and accreditation processes.

Recently, new external reports have found fault in the California Community College outcomes and institutional practices. In *Rules of the Game: How State Policy Creates Barriers to Degree Completion and Impedes Student Success in the California Community Colleges* Shulock and Moore (2007) claimed the community college system has failed expectations for specific outcomes. Some politically active organizations have taken aim at the process of peer review to accredit institutions and guarantee quality outcomes. In a report by the Association Council of Trustees and Alumni (ACTA) called *Why Accreditation Doesn’t Work and What Policymakers Can Do about It* (2007) the national process of peer review accreditation is referred to as a broken and ineffective process. The Council on Higher Education Assessment (CHEA), which oversees the regional accreditation processes, summarizes the claims of the ACTA paper by stating,

Why Accreditation Doesn’t Work offers breathtaking generalizations about accreditation, buttressed only by a series of anecdotes and offering little or no evidence for its broad condemnation of the enterprise. Accreditation, the paper says, is suffering from seven deadly sins: It does nothing to assure quality; it examines inputs and not the outputs in which the public is interested; it undermines institutional autonomy and diversity; it contributes to rising college costs; it is an unaccountable, federally mandated monopoly; it is largely a secret process and it is a “conflicted, closed and clubby system.” In short, accreditation is “bad education policy” and fails to assure quality. (Inside Accreditation Vol 3 No. 3)

Are any of these conclusions founded on solid evidence? Do the conclusions focus on the wrong type of measurement, of indirect and irremediable measures, paralleling yet separate from measuring actual learning? Have educators honestly answered these questions and provided either evidence to the contrary or plans to address issues that can be improved? Most certainly, without a response or with a business as usual approach, we are looking at pressures from external agencies and the federal government who feel they can do our jobs better or have answers that work.

There are many examples where outcomes and accountability measures have been undertaken by outside entities, other than faculty, and the results have not accomplished the desired effect: the improvement of teaching and learning. An example of this kind of failure is large stakes testing which results in comparisons between schools, as experienced by K-12 institutions through the No Child Left Behind Act. Another example of external measures is the use of individual student assessments, such as the SAT or GRE, which provide an amorphous measure of some aspect of learning, but by no means provide data to improve learning or teaching. While large stakes testing may measure something, this testing is not part of an assessment cycle and is not set up to actually improve teaching or student learning. External measures often provide only superficial information that is limited to comparisons of students or schools. In order to accurately assess the dynamics of learning in all domains at all levels, assessment must be planned and implemented in a scholarly fashion by faculty, the teaching experts.

Outcomes and assessment, that benefit student learning, must focus on the dynamic roles of faculty and on the teaching-learning interface, emphasizing pedagogical techniques and observable student learning. Important criteria for classroom assessment and the teaching-learning interface have been emphasized by many authors (Angelo, 1995; Black & Wiliam, 1998; Brookhart, 1999; M. S. Miller, 1999; Suskie, 2000; Wright, 1999). Understanding the power of assessment, that it is a two edged sword that can both improve education when done correctly, but also has the power to reduce, mechanize and limit education on the other hand, is essential. Boud (1995) raises an important consideration explaining that if faculty did not fully understand the power inherent in assessment, it could serve as a real shortcoming. These shortcomings involve overemphasizing single summative tests, high stakes testing, and assessment that does not ultimately benefit students. These potential dangers are detailed at the Fair Testing website (<http://fairtest.org>) and elaborated upon by Wiggins (1993) in *Assessing Student Performance: Exploring the Limits of Testing*.

Having considered the potential difficulties with assessment, it is also clear that research supports the fact that assessment can be a great tool to improve teaching and learning. In *What You Measure is What You Get* (1994), Hummel and Huitt describe how the types of assessment methods used determined how students learned and influenced how faculty taught. Boud (1995) also explains that the benefit of well defined assessment practices is the ability to prompt learning both for the faculty member and the students. In other words, what we assess, acts as a map to direct student learning, guiding them in their studies and time investment. Black and Wiliam (1998) in *Inside the Black Box: Raising Standards through Classroom Assessment* provide impressive data that proves formative

assessment is one of the most powerful methods known to improve learning. The focus of assessment must be directed at the correct venue, the student-learner interface, as Wright claims,

Post secondary assessment done right must be rooted in the course and in the classroom, in the individual cells, to speak metaphorically, where the metabolism of learning actually takes place. (1999)

Building on this, Stiggins (2002) adds an additional perspective to assessment. He suggests that the purposes of assessment are not only educational improvement and accountability but also assessment for learning. Doing assessment that promotes success and informs learning, rather than just measuring learning, requires using assessment as an instructional tool (Chappuis & Stiggins, 2002; Travis, 1996; Wiggins, 1993). The principles discussed above suggest important components necessary for faculty assessment training and underscore the importance of faculty in driving this process.

Several authors highlight the importance of equipping faculty to clearly state outcomes about what a student should be able to know or do at the completion of a course or program (Friedlander & Serban, in press; Nichols, 1995; Volkwein, 2003; Walvoord & Anderson, 1998; Wright, 1999). This is important because well-stated outcomes actually suggest the means or method of assessment simplifying or directing faculty selection of assessment tools. Nichols (1995) highlights the importance of training faculty to develop a limited number of substantive outcomes. This entails reflective analysis of the complex skills, knowledge, and abilities that students should be able to do as a result of the coursework (Brookhart, 1999; Huba & Freed, 2000; Wright). Linkage of course outcomes to program outcomes, and program outcomes to institutional level outcomes, is essential and occurs most easily after faculty have developed the expertise within their own courses (Benander et al., 2000; Brookhart). Miller stated,

Classroom assessment is the purest form of assessment-for-improvement, because the information gleaned can be immediately used to improve teaching and learning ...the further away from the individual classroom you get, the harder it becomes to turn assessment data into useable information. (1997)

Unfortunately, training on student learning outcomes, pedagogy, and assessment often occurs on the run. Many faculty simply emulate the teaching practices of the most effective teacher in his or her educational experience. Nevertheless, assessing student learning is not a new technique; it is an integral part of the job when it comes to evaluating student work. Focusing on student learning outcomes and assessment involves more explicit and purposeful activities with respect to work faculty have always done (Walvoord & Anderson, 1998; Brookhart, 1999). The difference in meeting the assessment expectations delineated in the new accreditation standards requires conventions beyond typical grading and beyond faculty focusing on individual classrooms. It requires that faculty become both discipline experts and skilled assessment practitioners. This demands leadership and clearly defined tasks, plus well organized training to make the process beneficial. In an extensive literature review by the

committee there was no evidence that any system of higher education has addressed an organized training plan for Student Learning Outcomes Coordinators.

Background

While career and technical education (vocational education) had been outcomes-based for years, Student Learning Outcomes and assessment became a focus for all disciplines in California Community Colleges in 2002 when newly adopted accreditation standards placed them at the center of college life. The Accrediting Commission for Community and Junior Colleges, Western Association of Schools and Colleges (ACCJC/WASC) 2002 Accreditation Standards require:

Standard I B. Improving Institutional Effectiveness

The institution demonstrates a conscious effort to produce and support student learning, measures that learning, assesses how well learning is occurring and makes changes to improve student learning. The institution also organizes its key processes and allocates its resources to effectively support student learning. The institution demonstrates its effectiveness by providing 1) evidence of the achievement of student learning outcomes and 2) evidence of institution and program performance. The institution uses ongoing and systematic evaluation and planning to refine its key processes and improve student learning. See additional details in the Standards.

Standard II. Student Learning Programs and Services

The institution offers high-quality instructional programs, student support services, and library and learning support services that facilitate and demonstrate the achievement of stated student learning outcomes. See additional details in the Standards.

The Academic Senate for California community colleges had concerns about the implications of the new standards and its emphasis on student learning outcomes. Though supportive of authentic assessment, the Academic Senate feared that the new standards would lend themselves to a “one size fits all” approach for all of California’s 109 community colleges, similar to the testing imposed on the K-12 system as part of the No Child Left Behind initiative. The Academic Senate also worried that the cost of implementing the new standards was an unfunded mandate, one that would place an undue financial burden on local colleges. Finally, the role of faculty in meeting the new standards was also an area of concern; the Academic Senate feared that work with SLOs and the design of assessment processes would not fall where it rightfully belonged – in faculty hands. Many of these concerns have not materialized.

Since the implementation of the new standards, visiting accreditation teams have held the colleges to higher and higher levels of compliance with a gradually increasing focus from the writing and documentation of student learning outcomes to the assessment of those

outcomes and more recently to the tying of those outcomes to budgeting and planning. Although this focus on student learning outcomes appears new to ACCJC/WASC accreditation, it has been the standard in all the other regional accreditation commissions, most having begun in the early 1990's. Career and technical educational programs have been held to this high standard by individual program accreditation organizations, such as the Board of Registered Nursing (BRN). But for many disciplines and institutions as a whole, the focus of accreditation standards on teaching and learning outcomes as opposed to physical, financial and human resources moved the measuring stick for quality higher education from inputs to outputs; this represented a significant paradigm shift for California faculty. The new ACCJC standards moved the evaluation of colleges from a focus on educational resources, faculty quality and curricular content to new questions related to student outcomes. What can the student do as a result of their education? How does the college document student learning? And how does the college use that documentation in planning processes?

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