

Status of Assessing Student Learning Outcomes in Community Colleges

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California is the last of the major states to address student learning outcomes in accreditation. Are the California community colleges very far behind the rest of the country? How can we assess the gap between California community colleges and the rest of the country? What are the major lessons that California community colleges can learn from other states' community colleges regarding the implementation of student learning outcomes? These are the very questions that we expected to find answers to in making our decision to co-edit volume number 126 in the New Directions for Community College series on measuring student learning outcomes. The volume will be published in July 2004 and can be ordered from Jossey-Bass (www.josseybass.com or 800-762-2974).

We invited authors who were recognized as leaders in the community college assessment movement to contribute chapters to our book and we did extensive reading and research on what had been written on this topic. This research included reading recent self-study accreditation reports completed by community colleges in states that have been subject to accreditation standards requiring assessing student learning outcomes.

What Have We Learned?

Although the assessment movement spans more than two decades, many community colleges are still in the early stages of their journey towards assessing student learning outcomes. The chapters in this volume are meant to facilitate and enrich this journey.

Most of what has been written about assessment of learning outcomes has focused on four-year colleges and universities and vocational/technical programs offered at community colleges. Moreover, what has been written on this topic focuses on the rationale for assessing student learning outcomes, the processes colleges have taken or could take to implement student learning outcomes assessment; the identification of categories of learning outcomes that students

should achieve as a result of completing institutional general education and, to a much lesser extent, major field requirements; non-evidenced based reports by some faculty members that the focus on identifying and assessing learning outcomes has made them more effective teachers; and inventories of the components of a comprehensive model for assessing and improving student attainment of desired learning outcomes. Lacking at this time are comprehensive, practical and sustainable models that practitioners in community college settings can use for assessing, documenting and using learning outcomes data to increase student attainment of desired learning outcomes. Also lacking at this time are meaningful measures for assessing the learning outcomes specified by colleges and credible evidence showing that efforts to assess student-learning outcomes have resulted in gains in achieving those outcomes, particularly at the general education, major field, certificate and degree levels.

Our book provides a comprehensive summary of the status of the movement to assess student learning outcomes in community colleges. It includes examples that community colleges can apply to planning and implementing the assessment of student learning outcomes at the classroom, course, program, and institutional levels to satisfy local, state and accreditation requirements for assessing learning outcomes as a means for improving student success. This volume is designed for practitioners looking for information on best practices for gaining institutional support for assessing student learning outcomes (SLO), processes to follow in designing an effective plan to assess SLOs, identification of desired outcomes of general education, and examples of how colleges are implementing specific components of a student learning outcomes plan. The following is a summary of what we have learned after a year and a half of working with contributing authors, reading and researching the topic.

We found community colleges are finding it difficult to design, develop, implement and sustain a comprehensive approach to assessing student learning outcomes. Community college practitioners need to devote significant time at their individual campuses trying to discover how to approach assessing student learning outcomes. More specifically, community colleges each being asked to literally start from scratch in figuring out how to assess student learning outcomes. There is little evidence that multi-year efforts to assess student learning outcomes impact student learning and development and the achievement of desired institutional outcomes.

Primary Challenges and Recommendations

Challenge number one. There is a lack of evidence that multi-year efforts to assess student learning outcomes impact student learning and development, achievement of desired institutional outcomes, instructional methods, co-curricular programs and college policies and processes. The observations and conclusions made by several of the authors in this volume offer insights on why full models for assessing student learning outcomes that practitioners could adapt for their own institutions are not available.

In his comprehensive analysis of the status of student learning assessment, Volkwein (2003) noted “Faculty are most enthusiastic about assessment when they fully understand what assessment is and how they and their students can benefit. When assessment is focused on improving teaching and learning, faculty recognize it as being connected to their interests.” However, Volkwein goes on to state that knowledge of the effects of the use of assessment in higher education on student performance, instructional methods and academic policy remains limited.

With respect to program level assessment in community colleges (other than those in English composition, mathematics, or from programs other than those in health careers or with certification or license exams), Trudy Bers, another contributing author, was not able to find many examples of program-level assessment that are actually being done rather than planned, or assessments that have generated results used by the college for improving or sustaining program quality. She concluded that program-level assessment at community colleges is still in its infancy.

Although much has been written about the importance of linking the assessment of outcomes to improvement of student learning and development, there has been limited documentation of how the assessment results have been used to guide instructional methods. Other than examples of classroom assessment techniques used to assess specific aspects of student learning, there is an absence of literature linking various pedagogical techniques to the promotion of the desired student learning outcomes. The assessment processes used by colleges are often silent on the training required in the area of pedagogy, instructional methods and co-

curricular programs that promote student attainment of desired learning outcomes. Similarly, little or no attention has been given to changes in institutional policies and procedures to support the assessment effort (for example, faculty evaluation policies and incentives, adequate support services, linking of faculty professional development efforts to support student learning outcomes assessment, program definition, and clarification of student expectations and standards).

Recommendations

Based on what we have learned from our work on this topic, we have identified the following recommendations:

College level:

- The contributing authors provided excellent examples of the processes that community college practitioners can follow to engage the campus community in the student learning assessment effort. However, colleges need to go beyond processes to identify how best to measure, analyze, interpret and report the results of this effort. For each student learning outcome to be achieved, whether at the course, program, or institutional level, there has to be a clear definition of the skill (competency) to be acquired, assessment tool(s) or technique(s) used to measure the attainment of the skill and measurement, documentation and reporting of the actual extent to which the skill has been acquired.
- An overall framework for reporting the achievement of desired student learning outcomes is needed at the course, program and institutional levels. The framework should allow institutions to compare changes over time both at the aggregate and granular levels (for example., entry levels of skills for various groups of students).
- Colleges must provide professional development opportunities for faculty and co-curricular staff on effective pedagogical techniques and interventions strategies that support the attainment of specific student learning outcomes. For example, few faculty outside English have received any formal training in teaching reading, writing or public speaking skills. If a desired outcome is to improve students' communication skills (reading, writing, speaking, listening), then faculty teaching

outside of the English and Communications departments need to receive training on effective strategies and instructional methods for developing, assessing, and assisting students with these skills. A similar statement could be made for each of the other desired general education skills and competencies (e.g., computation skills, community skills, critical thinking and problem solving skills, information management skills, interpersonal skills, personal skills, technology skills).

State and accrediting agencies:

State and accrediting agencies should provide guidance regarding the core student learning outcomes that should be achieved by community colleges for each of their various missions. The guide would allow for colleges to adopt or adapt the student learning outcomes and align them with their unique environments. These guides should also include suggested methods, tools, instruments for assessing each of the desired student learning outcomes and, if possible, normative data to provide baselines for comparisons.

- The suggested core student learning outcomes should go beyond traditional institutional output measures such as course completion rates, number of degrees awarded, number of students transferring, and job placement rates.
- State and accrediting agencies should identify qualified individuals that colleges could call upon to assist them with their student learning outcomes assessment. If possible, these individuals should complete certification training to ensure that colleges will receive appropriate guidance and assistance in their assessment efforts.

These recommendations would save each college an enormous amount of time and resources to re-invent the wheel or start from scratch the effort of how to define, collect, analyze, and report student learning outcomes. The need for such assistance is obvious since after more than two decades of attempting to assess student learning outcomes, community college practitioners are still unclear on how to effectively conduct a comprehensive program of assessment of student learning outcomes.

Challenge number 2: Lack of knowledge about assessment processes, tools and models.

Generally, at any given college, few faculty and staff have been formally trained in:

- developing measurable and valid learning outcomes;
- aligning the curriculum with those outcomes;
- developing assessment questions, instruments and methods; and
- developing and implementing a plan for assessing those outcomes that is manageable, meaningful and sustainable.

In addition, few colleges have an infrastructure in place to provide the technical knowledge and support to assist full- and part-time faculty with the design, collection, analysis and application of assessment data. Moreover, few institutions have designated staff member(s) with the time, knowledge and skills to link course, program and institutional learning outcomes or to disseminate the results of the student learning outcomes efforts.

Throughout the volume, each of the authors points out to the lack of knowledge in this area as a major impediment. For example, in one of the chapters, Miles and Wilson cite the following observation of their external evaluator: “Project participants universally identified assessment as the most difficult aspect of their work. Team members from all areas of the college admitted that they do not know how to assess...”

Recommendations.

College level:

Prior to engaging in any institution-wide assessment of student learning outcomes effort, colleges need to develop a comprehensive plan to provide faculty and staff with the competencies they need to conduct assessment. As Serban suggests, a college could start by identifying individuals on campus with relevant skills who could provide leadership and on-going technical support for this effort. Since it is unlikely that any one person would have knowledge in all required areas of assessment (e.g., constructing valid test questions, methods of evaluating writing, critical thinking, and an array of assessment techniques such as embedded course assessment, authentic assessment techniques, performance based outcomes measures, holistic scoring, portfolio analysis), a team of faculty and staff with in-house expertise would need to be assembled. If appropriate, one or more consultants may need to be employed to assist this team in developing and enhancing its expertise and in crafting a plan for providing on-going technical support and training for both full- and part-time instructors at the college. Colleges

should start with a subset of courses and conduct a pilot study to evaluate all aspects of the assessment process.

State and accrediting agencies:

- States and accrediting agencies should provide training materials on assessment processes, tools and models that can be used by faculty and staff at individual colleges.
- In addition to training materials, states and accrediting agencies should sponsor workshops through a variety of delivery modes to assist colleges in using the training materials developed and to disseminate best practices.

Challenge number. 3: Difficulty in gaining consensus among faculty in what they are trying to achieve at the course, program and college levels.

Generally, course outlines include a list of objectives and methods of measuring those objectives. However, these objectives are not necessarily student learning outcomes and are not stated in measurable terms. Also these objectives are typically stated broadly without specificity in terms of particular skills or competencies that students should acquire. In most community colleges, at the department level, faculty have not had a tradition of working together to develop at a granular level student learning outcomes and methods for assessing those outcomes. More specifically, most faculty have not had the training or experience in identifying student learning outcomes, how they should be assessed, and in determining the level of ability or knowledge students should attain to reflect adequate or excellent learning standards. Few of the instruments faculty use have been validated to ensure that they are in fact assessing what they claim to measure.

This challenge is discussed in Bers' chapter where she identified the difficulties of measuring the outcomes at the program level at a community college. These include difficulty in defining a program, the very diverse course taking patterns of students, the large percentage of community college students who take courses at multiple institutions or from colleges within or outside multi-campus institutions.

Similar challenges exist at the institutional level. These challenges are compounded by the fact that colleges have no experience or models on how to develop and sustain a comprehensive effort for assessing student learning outcomes at the institutional level.

Recommendations

College level:

Faculty need to have an understanding of how student learning outcomes assessment at the course and program levels contributes to institutional goal achievement.

- As stated earlier, colleges should provide faculty in each department or discipline with training and technical support required to develop meaningful and measurable student learning outcomes.
- Colleges need to develop strategies to ensure that the methods identified for assessing student learning outcomes are used consistently by all faculty members, including those teaching part-time, evenings and in off-campus locations or through alternative instructional methods such online and distance learning.
- Faculty need to have systematic feedback on the extent to which the assessment conducted is making difference in student learning and success at the course, program and institutional levels.
- Assessing student learning outcomes should result in a clear identification of skills, competencies and disposition towards learning in which students need additional assistance. Faculty should have viable options for providing students with the assistance needed in a timely fashion. One of the options is how to best integrate student support programs and services with the classroom instructional processes.

State and accrediting agencies:

- State agencies and regional community colleges consortia should promote inter-institutional networks of faculty and co-curricular support staff to facilitate sharing of teaching and assessment techniques at the discipline as well as institution-wide levels.
- States should encourage, if not require, faculty from community colleges and four-year institutions to work jointly in developing standard student learning outcomes for each lower division course in each major for which articulation agreements exist. Developing common student learning outcomes, methods for assessing the attainment of those outcomes, and standards of achievement should result in stronger articulation of courses and programs, easier student transition

from community colleges to transfer institutions and a greater degree of sharing and collaboration among faculty on best practices in pedagogy and assessment. Similar collaboration is needed in the area of co-curricular programs and services.

- States should consider developing curriculum guidelines for remedial, core general education, and occupational education courses for which there is no specialized accreditation or external certification. These curriculum frameworks could include identification of student learning outcomes to be achieved, examples of assessment measures, tests or other instruments that could be utilized, and illustrations of effective instructional strategies for promoting the attainment of desired student learning outcomes. Faculty and staff from all segments of education, secondary and post-secondary, should be involved in developing and updating these curriculum frameworks.

Challenge no. 4: Implementing and sustaining a comprehensive student learning outcomes assessment effort in a community college setting.

The processes community colleges can follow to build support for and engage faculty and staff in the development of assessment of student learning outcomes have been well documented. However, as Serban pointed out in one of the chapters, what it is missing from the literature are specific models for developing, implementing and sustaining comprehensive assessment efforts that take into account the unique features in a community college setting. These include multiple and diverse missions; transient student populations with various educational goals and needs, which frequently do not include completing courses, programs, certificates or degrees in the prescribed sequence; large cadre of part-time faculty; delivery of instruction and services in multiple locations of an institution; and limited technical staff to support all phases of student learning outcomes assessment.

Beno notes that accrediting agencies anticipate that it will take colleges 10 to 15 years to implement their student learning outcomes assessment initiatives. A significant challenge facing community colleges is the lack of adequate time, resources and incentives to engage in an educational reform of this magnitude. This is particularly the case now that colleges have entered into an era of scarce resources, when faculty and staff feel over-extended and institutional budgets continue to be constrained if not reduced.

Recommendations:

College level:

- In developing their overall plans for assessment, colleges need to take into consideration the financial and human resources required to support implementing and sustaining such efforts. As previously noted, colleges need to allocate or re-allocate resources to such areas as training, technical support staff, development of information systems needed to capture assessment data, and staff to analyze, report and disseminate assessment results.
- In order to sustain such an effort, colleges need to provide each of their constituencies with evidence that this allocation of scarce resources results in improved student learning and achievement than might have been achieved otherwise had the resources been applied differently.
- Given the magnitude of what colleges are being asked to achieve coupled with the lack of adequate models, tools and staff and financial resources to do so, colleges will be well advised to focus their efforts to assess and improve student learning outcomes in a limited number of courses and programs. If successful, they can generalize their approaches to other parts of the curriculum.

State and accrediting agencies:

- As noted by Milam and other contributing authors, accrediting agencies have spearheaded the drive for institutions to measure student learning outcomes prior to their having evidence that the new requirements will in fact produce the desired results. Furthermore, they are requiring each institution to engage in this transformational effort with limited guidance on what is expected in terms of student learning outcomes to be achieved or effective models and tools for doing so. This has resulted in each institution having to spend far more time and resources than would have been required had the accrediting agencies done appropriate pilot testing and evaluation of the success of their requirements prior to imposing them on all institutions. Since some accrediting agencies have been asking for such evidence for an extended period of time, it is now time for them to step back and evaluate their

requirements and to provide community colleges with much greater guidance and assistance than now exists.

- State agencies need to define what they expect from community colleges in terms of student learning outcomes assessment. Moreover, there is a lack of connection between what states are requesting for institutional accountability and what accrediting agencies are now requiring colleges with respect to student learning outcomes assessment. As noted by Burke and Minassians, in one of the chapters, to date, states have limited their performance measures to institutional outputs (e.g., number of degrees, licensure exam rates, number of transfers, enrollment trends, time-to-degree, college participation rates) rather than student learning outcomes. The state measures have not taken into account the multiple missions and diverse clientele of community colleges. Similarly, the states need to identify what resources and incentives they need to provide to sustain the college student learning outcomes assessment efforts.

Conclusion

So, are California community colleges very far behind the rest of the nation in their efforts to assess student learning outcomes? The answer to this question is yes in that many community colleges outside of California have been engaged in the process of identifying and developing strategies to assess student learning outcomes to address the standards of their respective accrediting agencies. However, as noted in this article, to date, we are not aware of any community college that has developed or implemented a comprehensive model for assessing student learning outcomes. What are the major lessons that California community colleges can learn from other states' community colleges regarding the implementation of student learning outcomes? California community college practitioners can learn a great deal about the processes used by their counterparts in other states to gain support for assessing SLOs, the types of measures they have identified to assess student learning at the course and general education levels, and the challenges they are confronting in designing and implementing a sustainable model to assess SLOs at the course, major, certificate and degree levels.

Our book covers many of the critical components of assessment of student learning outcomes. It provides an overview of the issues, methods, and challenges that community colleges face in

developing and implementing core components of their student learning outcomes assessment initiatives. In addition, the volume includes many specific examples from colleges across the country on how various components of student learning outcomes assessment have been developed and implemented.

While each of the authors advocated the importance of measuring student learning outcomes, they each noted the formidable challenges colleges face in doing so. The purpose of this article is to identify the major challenges that if not addressed will continue to serve as barriers to fully realizing the anticipated benefits of requiring colleges to measure student learning outcomes. We have noted that much can be done by state and accrediting agencies, as well as by the colleges themselves to help overcome these challenges. In addition, universities with graduate programs for higher education should consider offering specialized training for graduate students as well as practitioners in all aspects of student learning outcomes assessment. Graduate schools should incorporate into their teaching training programs methods for assessing and improving the attainment of student learning outcomes. Researchers in all disciplines need to focus more of their efforts on identifying, evaluating and disseminating effective strategies for measuring and improving attainment of desired student learning outcomes.

References

Volkwein, J. F. "Implementing Outcomes Assessment On Your Campus." *The RP Group eJournal*, Volume 1, May 2003
http://rpgroup.org/publications/eJournal/Volume_1/volume_1.htm

The monograph provides numerous examples of various approaches community colleges have taken to develop and implement components of assessment of student learning outcomes. Below are several.

Overviews and Comments about the State of Assessment in Community Colleges

Diaz-Lefebvre, R. "In the Trenches: Assessment as if Understanding Mattered."

www.league.org/publication/abstracts/learning/lclabs0308.htm

Integration of Assessment in Campus Planning and Accreditation Self Studies

St. Charles Community College replaced an initial administration-led assessment program that relied on standardized tests with a faculty-led process. Faculty developed written goals and objectives for student learning in writing, oral communication, math and science, social science and the humanities, and computer literacy. Within each of these areas, faculty designed “assessment projects” tailored to the goals and objectives, with measures based on authentic student work in designated classes. <http://www.stchas.edu/NCA/10.pdf>

Mt. Hood Community College provides another exemplar of systematic planning and assessment http://www.mhcc.edu/campus/campus_info/allabout/research/institutional_master_plan/education/main.htm

Using Technology for Inter-Campus Sharing of Assessment

At Sinclair Community College, faculty have created guiding principles for assessment (such as “Assessment of student learning and development is a process that is separate from faculty evaluation”) within which faculty in each department determine specific assessment approaches and methods that they will use.

<http://www.sinclair.edu/about/assessment/principles/index.cfm>

At Lane Community College, a “Strategic Learning Initiative” focuses on using new knowledge about the nature of learning to shape experiments with learning communities, enhancements to the college’s technology infrastructure, alternative course schedules and formats, distance education, and a variety of faculty development projects.

<http://teach.lanecc.edu/sli/slig&o.htm>

Program Level Assessment

At Mesa Community College in Arizona, the faculty has developed an interdisciplinary approach to assessing general education learning outcomes that can be adapted to assess learning outcomes at the program-level in arts and sciences, provided that faculty identify program-level learning objectives.

<http://www.mc.maricopa.edu/organizations/employee/orp/assessment/>

Assessing Online Learning

Alley, L. R. and Jansak, K.E. “Applying the Principles of Learning Science to Web-based Instruction.” City: World Class Strategies, LLC, 2001.

<http://www.worldclasstrategies.com/>

Electronic Portfolios: Resources for Higher Education

<http://aahe.ital.utexas.edu/electronicportfolios/>

Colorado Community Colleges Online

Faculty expectations for student engagement

<http://www.ccconline.org/faculty/facultygold.htm>

Carroll Community College. *Flexible Learning – Assess Your Learning Preferences.*

Westminster, MD: Carroll Community College, 2003.

<http://www.carroll.cc.md.us/flexible/assessment.asp>

DETC. *Accreditation Standards.* Washington, D.C.: The Distance Education and Training Council, 2003.

<http://www.detc.org/accreditHandbk.html>

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