

June 2020

San Diego State University:

Supporting Commuter Students through Equity-Driven and Student-Focused Assessment

Erick Montenegro



San Diego State University: Supporting Commuter Students through Equity-Driven and Student-Focused Assessment

Erick Montenegro

San Diego State University (SDSU), founded in 1897, is a public, four-year doctoral institution with high research activity located in San Diego, California. The university's **mission**, "to provide research-oriented, high-quality education for undergraduate and graduate students and to contribute to the solution of problems through excellence and distinction in teaching, research, and service" is strengthened by its "academic curriculum distinguished by direct contact with faculty and an international emphasis that prepares students for a global future". SDSU enrolls over 36,000 students each year and ranks among the top universities in the country for the racial/ethnic and economic diversity among its student body. SDSU also ranks highly for the number of bachelor's degrees awarded to students of color among its 91 undergraduate majors, 76 masters programs, and 23 doctoral programs. The university's commitment to continue this trend has helped to support various equity-driven initiatives across campus, including in assessment. This case study showcases how an institutional focus on equity can help foster equitable assessment through empowering faculty, administrators, and staff to explore equity gaps affecting students in Commuter Life (an SDSU initiative), use assessment data to close those gaps, and leverage the student voice and experience to inform improvement via a seminar course for commuter students.

Equity-Driven Assessment at San Diego State University

SDSU has an equity-driven approach to assessment where decisions are based on ensuring students can achieve their true potential regardless of background. This equity-driven, high-achievement decision making informs access, equity, and inclusion initiatives for students, staff, and faculty alike. SDSU believes it is important to not separate the discussion of high-achievement and being equity-driven. The institution and its initiatives need to be held to both standards for the institution and students to achieve their goals. Too often there is a misconception that equity initiatives create less rigorous pathways and/or hand-outs for specific student populations targeted by the initiatives. This could not be further from the truth, nor from the goal of equity-driven approaches. Maintaining a focus on high-achievement helps ensure that interventions continue to be improved in ways that matter for the target student population and align with the mission of the institution.

Please Cite As:

Montenegro, E. (2020, June). *San Diego State University: Supporting commuter students through equity-driven and student-focused assessment*. Urbana, IL: University of Illinois and Indiana University, National Institute for Learning Outcomes Assessment, Council for the Advancement of Standards in Higher Education, and Anthology.

Knowing very well that higher education uses the four-year graduation rate as a measuring stick of institutional success, SDSU continuously explores how new initiatives can best position students to graduate in four years. This positioning involves being intentional about which student populations benefit from which specific initiatives, and which populations may need additional supports to receive the same benefits. SDSU is very aware that equal access to opportunities to graduate in four years is not what every student needs nor wants, but SDSU believes this should not be a decision that is taken away from certain students due to inadequate pathways to desired levels of achievement.

To ensure graduation rates alone do not drive decisions, SDSU aligns many outcomes-based assessments with key institutional performance indicators, even creating “equity performance indicators”—learning outcomes rooted in students’ personal, social, cognitive, and behavioral skills that can close gaps in students’ persistence and graduation rates—that align directly with learning and development outcomes that matter to the institution, to specific programs, and to students. The “equity performance indicators”—or learning outcomes—help to inform improvements in how both programs and courses are designed and delivered to help students succeed.

Student Lived Experience

The equity-driven assessment approach at SDSU integrates students’ actual lived experiences through multiple outcomes-based assessment methods appropriate for diverse student populations. Assessment processes are built with an awareness of the student populations served, and use language that is understandable to various student populations in both assessments and the learning outcomes those assessments address. It is important for students to be able to understand and internalize the learning outcomes they are expected to gain, as well as understand the assessments through which they demonstrate their learning, so students can be in the best position to succeed and make connections between their learning experiences.

To ensure students are positioned for success, SDSU does not just approach equity in terms of race and ethnicity. The institution interrogates data for differentiated opportunity, persistence, and attainment based on students’ racial/ethnic backgrounds, and SDSU also examines various characteristics to ensure students do not fall between the cracks (including gender, first-gen, age, residency, income, and so on). This equity case study provides an example of this approach, exploring how SDSU applied its equity-driven approach to Commuter Life students—a population that is diverse within itself—to better serve them and help attain comparable outcomes to residential life peers. The university’s rooted emphasis on serving students of color and students from diverse backgrounds helped to empower Commuter Life staff and administrators to explore equity gaps within the program and find creative solutions to drive more equitable outcomes forward.

Identifying & Closing Equity Gaps in Commuter Life

The **Commuter Life** program at SDSU, made possible through a grant written by Dr. Rey Monzon and funded by the Department of Education, is a division of the institution’s student affairs department under the leadership of Dr. Randy Timm, assistant vice president for campus life and dean of students. Commuter Life supports students who live at home and commute to campus—both within the city of San Diego and also students who commute from Mexico and cross the border each day. Knowing that commuter students do not engage with the campus community as strongly as on-campus residential

students and the implications this can have for persistence and graduation, Commuter Life aims to engage commuter students through workshops informing them of campus resources, peer mentoring programs to build bonds with others on campus, flexible programming, and other support services and professional development opportunities that help foster community, student success, and positive connections to the SDSU campus community. The students served by Commuter Life are diverse. Many are students of color from various ethnicities, and the vast majority also have additional responsibilities on top of being a student including: managing households, caring for children and/or family members, and/or working off-campus. Commuter Life currently serves over 1,000 students across its commuter success pathways offerings.

In 2010, Commuter Life staff noticed that commuter students were experiencing inequitable outcomes in their education among both learning outcomes and metrics such as retention, persistence and graduation rates. This prompted a continuous exploration of efforts to remedy this, which led Commuter Life to consider equitable assessment as a viable approach to close equity gaps. Specifically, Commuter Life wondered how they could leverage outcomes-based assessment to repair these inequities and yield commuter life students more equitable outcomes compared to their residential life peers.

We know that sense of belonging for commuter students is known to predict retention and persistence to graduation (Harper, Smith, & Davis, 2018; Pokorny, Holley, & Kane, 2016). But developing this sense of belonging also comes in different ways for different students. Students who live on-campus have access to campus resources with less barriers than those who live off-campus. The Commuter Life program began to focus on ways to introduce commuter students to these same benefits; with an emphasis to not prescribe specific resources to students based on assumptions of their needs but on students' actualized, expressed needs.

Leveraging the Student Voice to Improve Their Education

To get direct input from students, Commuter Life students are given a survey to gauge their interests, note their expected/declared major, and help to discern a pathway for students through uncovering their needs and informing appropriate supports. One important finding was the realization that commuter students wanted more intrusive support that could inform them of what to be doing in their education and when. Students needed to know how to identify and acquire skills they may be missing, what opportunities are available to them, and how to take advantage of those opportunities.

As a result, a University Professor was given assigned time to collaboratively re-design a preexisting one-credit hour university seminar (USEM) course in the Fall of 2018 focused on academic skills development, cultivating well-being and cultural wealth, and building campus engagement, including optimizing classroom sense of belonging. Leveraging a flipped classroom, the USEM focused the discussion around one central theme or idea each week (e.g. community cultural wealth or leadership skills), meeting once a week for an hour throughout the semester. Through the USEM, commuter students could have dedicated time to review and apply skills that could help them succeed, including task management, test taking skills, learning how they learn, and navigating difficult conversations including those that address micro-aggressions. USEM instructors and advisors often took time to take students directly to campus resources and show them where to find supports physically on campus to eliminate as many barriers as possible for these students. As a result, Commuter Life USEM students had higher GPAs, higher first-year retention rates, and were less likely to be on academic probation compared to their peers who did not participate in the course.

The USEM relies upon students' first-person direct self-report reflections to gauge effectiveness and uncover areas of improvement. There is an understanding among Commuter Life and those involved in USEM that efforts really begin with and rely upon students' direct feedback regarding their expectations, needs, what is working, what is missing, challenges, etc. Artifacts such as student journal entries—shared by students through online course-management software such as Blackboard and through semester-long project assignments—are used to determine how students are experiencing their learning and development opportunities. Student focus-groups and surveys of student perspectives on the course have also been used to improve instructor training and course-design. Thus, the student voice has both an intentional place and a direct impact in how the efficacy and foci of the program are assessed and improved. Students are given the opportunity to become active participants in assessing their USEM course beyond end-of-semester evaluations, and to assess their learning experiences beyond testing.

Involving students in the assessment effort and listening to their input has also yielded results in how the program was improved. After learning that students wanted more supports on top of the USEM, the learning community combines the USEM with mentoring, additional one-credit discussion sections, and a general education-focused, credit-bearing Scholar Seminar that provides support for gen ed courses that have given commuter students trouble in the past. However, one caveat being that students wanted supports to be credit-generating opportunities whenever possible due to the time commitment and opportunity cost these efforts require from commuter students. As a result, the USEM Course was recently approved as a 3-unit, general education course. Student involvement in the Commuter Life learning community is flexible with engagement ranging from 1-8 hours/week depending on student availability and needs. The continued refinement of the USEM course is a direct result from an interdisciplinary university team intentionally involving students in assessment, and SDSU's continued equity-driven approach to improve commuter life.

Changing Outcomes and the Focus of Assessment to Address Equity Gaps

In re-designing the USEM course, Commuter Life realized they needed to dive deeper into what may be contributing to commuter students' inequitable outcomes. To do so, they turned to Dr. Marilee Bresciani Ludvik (2017), professor of postsecondary educational leadership at SDSU's College of Education, and leveraged her research on the neuroscience of learning and development. As a result, the USEM focused less on the easily identifiable student learning metrics—those gathered through test scores and standardized exams that easily feed performance metrics such as graduation rates and time to degree—and focused more on uncovering how the university's habits, beliefs, and ways of being influenced the cultivation of students' malleable intrapersonal competencies that lead to success. To properly meet their goals, Dr. Timm, Dr. Stephen Schellenberg, assistant vice president for educational effectiveness and professor of Geological Sciences, and Dr. Bresciani Ludvik prioritized an assessment process that analyzed and cultivated improvements in learning outcomes that lie below the surface, are harder to identify, yet can inform how to close the equity gaps impacting commuter students.

As a result, the USEM course focuses on increasing students' outcomes in areas where students needed the most support. Through a pre-test, commuter students identify their areas of need, such as sense of belonging, psychological well-being, metacognitive awareness, cultivation of leadership, and managing stress and anxiety. These outcomes—often disparagingly referred to as “soft-skills”—are what SDSU calls “equity performance indicators” because of how greatly they impact students' success. These outcomes are also malleable and can be improved in and out of the classroom, which provide an opportunity through which Commuter Life can work to close the equity gaps their students experience. The leadership team's resolve on focusing on these outcomes was strengthened by the

finding that cultivation of leadership, psychological well-being, and metacognitive awareness are significant predictors of GPA for SDSU's commuter students when controlling for other variables.

However, along with using these pre- and post-test results, SDSU made sure to contextualize the data and take active steps to understand how the campus culture and context, the program culture and context, and students' cultures and real-life contexts impact student outcomes attainment. This is another reason that students' journals, focus groups, and survey data are used in the assessment effort. Commuter Life is doing its best to avoid the "one-size fits all" approach to assessment, knowing that this does not work for everyone (Montenegro & Jankowski, 2017). However, they are also resource-bound, so it has proven difficult to provide a fully individualized assessment and instructional design for students. Instead, they have emphasized equitable assessment practices such as the use of different sources of evidence, centralized the student experience, and focused on assessing outcomes instead of relying on specific methods of demonstration (Montenegro & Jankowski, 2020).

The USEM course assessments and assignments are focused on activities where student behavior exemplifying a learning outcome can be directly observed. This includes taking lessons from the course and applying them where instructors can observe and provide feedback, also outside of the course (i.e., lowering student anxiety with attending professor office hours by assigning students to go speak with a professor and then process their experience with a peer mentor). Student reflections on the experience then help to supplement the task, give self-assessment of skill attainment, notice changes over time, put in their own words their learning/development story, and offer a narrative to complement the instructor's observations.

Additional sources of assessment data are gathered through a survey of instructors' perspectives on the course. These surveys help provide insights on instruction, challenge areas for students, and additional supports and trainings that instructors themselves need in order to better help students. Additionally, assessment data are gathered through notes from Commuter Life program coordinators regarding their meetings with students. These notes are an indirect way to leverage the student voice, triangulate instructor observations with student reflections, and help further contextualize the pre- and post-test data. These various sources of evidence come together to more holistically inform improvement strategies and close equity gaps through assessment.

For example, preliminary assessment data from the pre- and post-test indicated that commuter students in the USEM course actually decreased in their environmental mastery—an aspect of psychological well-being. Through student reflections and direct feedback, they were able to better understand why this happened and how to correct it. In their reflections, students noted that elements of this outcome were mentioned but were not reinforced or revisited in later class dates and assignments. Students also noted the need for more coaching related to specific outcomes (e.g., how to apply stress reduction techniques). Instructors and staff used this input to make changes and embed more concept reinforcement and coaching as part of future course design and delivery. Pre- and post-tests inform where problems may be and where students are in relation to an outcome, but without students' first-person narratives they may not know what to do to solve potential issues, continue to work toward closing equity gaps, and ultimately improve.

Future Directions

Given the success both the USEM course and the Commuter Life learning community are experiencing, the model has been expanded into other colleges across the university to: (1) partner with other programs

to better align the learning community with students' major specific needs; (2) help close equity gaps that other student populations are experiencing; and (3) tie in the goals of USEM into larger university goals to promote further collaboration and tap into additional campus resources. The USEM course also hopes to involve more faculty in content delivery. Currently, the faculty members involved in the project are involved in curriculum design, but are not serving as instructors for the course. Instead, the course is taught by very capable graduate students who have formed their own community of practice, receiving weekly supplemental trainings and coaching from Dr. Bresciani Ludvik and Commuter Life program staff.

Final Thoughts

At the heart of these assessment efforts is an inherently equity-driven approach. The team that lends their expertise to the Commuter Lifer USEM course come from across the institution. They came together because they realized they could help contribute to a project that identified that a student population is experiencing inequitable outcomes. Further, they all shared a desire to work to correct that observation and close the equity gaps. While the program is a joint Academic Affairs and Student Affairs initiative with Dr. Stephen Schellenberg and Dr. Randy Timm leading respectively, Dr. Rey Monzon from Analytical Studies and Institutional Research, Sandy Kahn, the College of Education's director of institutional research, and Dr. Nina Potter, the College of Education's director of assessment, lend their expertise to help Dr. Bresciani Ludvik analyze USEM's assessment data; being attentive to not ignore small sample-sizes, disaggregate data as much as possible, and look at the intersections of various student characteristics in relation to outcomes to ensure they are not missing anything important.

The key to this initiative's success was not radically changing assessment practices to be more equitable, but using an equity mindset to drive the work. An equity mindset was required to explore assessment data for inequities in the first place, and it was also instrumental in finding other members of the campus community to help address those inequities. SDSU faculty, administrators, and staff wear multiple hats—just like many others across higher education do—and they rely on collaboration to make efforts such as this possible given their many responsibilities and resource constraints. Their equity-driven approach sparked questions and creative solutions to find the answers to those questions. It sparked the need to listen to students, intentionally involve them in the assessment efforts, and vary sources of evidence. Their drive and equity focus keeps the work alive today; supported by the institution's shared focus on equity.

References

Bresciani Ludvik, M. (2017, May). *The neuroscience of learning and development: How can evidence legitimize self-reflection?* Urbana, IL: University of Illinois and Indiana University, National Institute for Learning Outcomes Assessment (NILOA).

Bresciani Ludvik, M. (2020). A new era of accountability: Resolving the clash of public good and economic stimulation performance. In J. P. Freeman, C. L. Keller, & R. L. Cambiano (Eds.) *Higher education response to exponential societal shifts* (pp.251-274). Hershey, PA: IGI Global.

Harper, S. R., Smith, E. J., & Davis, C. H. F. (2018). A critical race case analysis of Black undergraduate student success at an urban university. *Urban Education*, 53(1), 3-25. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0042085916668956>.

Montenegro, E., & Jankowski, N. A. (2020, January). *A new decade for assessment: Embedding equity into assessment praxis* (Occasional Paper No. 42). Urbana, IL: University of Illinois and Indiana University, National Institute for Learning Outcomes Assessment.

Montenegro, E., & Jankowski, N. A. (2017, January). *Equity and assessment: Moving towards culturally responsive assessment* (Occasional Paper No. 29). Urbana, IL: University of Illinois and Indiana University, National Institute for Learning Outcomes Assessment.

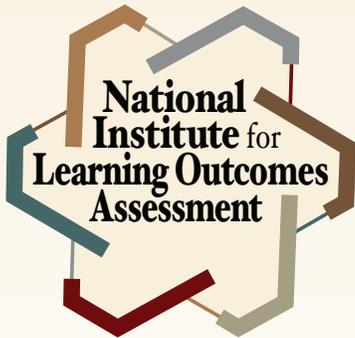
Pokorny, H., Holley, D., & Kane, S. (2017). Commuting, transitions and belonging: The experiences of students living at home in their first year at university. *Higher Education*, 74, 543-558. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734-016-0063-3>.

Acknowledgements

I want to express my gratitude for the hard work and dedication of the Commuter Life and USEM leadership team, as well as for the staff and students involved. It really is a collaborative effort from committed individuals across the institution driven to holistically serve, eliminate barriers, and close equity gaps affecting commuter students. Your work is motivating, reassuring, and important. Special thanks to Dr. Marilee Bresciani Ludvik, Dr. Stephen Schellenberg, and Dr. Randy Timm for their vision, empathy, hospitality, and willingness to share their equity-driven and student-focused approach to improving student outcomes.

Equity Case Studies

The National Institute for Learning Outcomes Assessment, the Council for the Advancement of Standards in Higher Education (CAS), and Campus Labs (now Anthology), in collaboration with the field of assessment in higher education, have undertaken a series of case studies focused on providing short, instructive examples focused on equitable approaches to assess student learning. The cases provide lessons learned that are widely applicable, and emphasize collaboration across the institution, specifically between academic and student affairs.



NILOA is a research and resource-development organization dedicated to documenting, advocating, and facilitating the systematic use of learning outcomes assessment to improve student learning. NILOA supports institutions in designing learning experiences and assessment approaches that strengthen the experience of diverse learners within a variety of institutional contexts. NILOA works in partnership with a broad range of organizations and provides technical assistance and research support to various projects focused on learning throughout the U.S. and internationally. Learn more at www.learningoutcomesassessment.org.

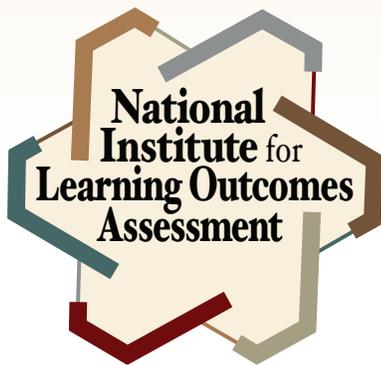


Leading the way for over 40 years, CAS is a consortium of professional associations in higher education that promotes the use of its professional standards for the development, assessment, and improvement of quality student learning, programs, and services. CAS reflects good practices and promotes intra-campus collaboration among its over 40 collaborating professional associations representing over 115,000 professionals in higher education. Learn more at www.cas.edu.



Campus Labs, Campus Management, and iModules have joined together to form Anthology. We exist to help higher education advance and thrive. Through a connected data experience that offers a holistic view, creates efficiencies, and provides intelligence, Anthology inspires constituents to reach their full potential using technology insights in admission and enrollment management; student success and retention; institutional and learning effectiveness; alumni and advancement; and enterprise applications and infrastructure. Anthology partners with more than 2,100 colleges and institutions in over 30 countries to address the needs of all constituents in higher education. Visit us at www.anthologyinc.com.

National Institute for Learning Outcomes Assessment



For more information, please contact:

National Institute for Learning Outcomes Assessment (NILOA)
University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign
51 Gerty Drive,
Suite 196 CRC, MC-672
Champaign, IL 61820

learningoutcomesassessment.org
niloa@education.illinois.edu
217.244.2155

Equity Case Study

www.learningoutcomesassessment.org/equity