



Moving from Compliance to a Culture of Inquiry: Student Learning Outcome Implementation and Professional Development in California Community Colleges

November 2020

Mary-Jo Apigo

Improving student learning outcomes (SLOs) is at the forefront of community college accreditation standards and national debates surrounding the quality of student learning. The paradigm shift to student-centered teaching and assessment has not corresponded with a rapid increase in opportunities to train faculty on how to incorporate relevant pedagogical and evaluation strategies in their classrooms. Few professional development models exist to train community college faculty, who are trained as content experts, how to develop or assess SLOs. In 2015, I conducted an explanatory sequential mixed methods study with survey, interview, and document review data to identify and explore professional development models that support community college faculty in completing the SLO assessment cycle and/or barriers to assessment. The research population was comprised of SLO Coordinators, Academic Senate Presidents, and Chief Instructional Officers (CIOs) across the 112 California community colleges at the time. The findings and related recommendations from the study are summarized below.

Faculty need professional development in assessment methodology and pedagogy to improve teaching and learning. While faculty are experts in their disciplines, few have studied the methodology and theory of modern assessment to develop the skills and expertise needed for effective measurement (Gardiner, 2002). In general, “good teachers have always developed and assessed student learning outcomes... Today, however, faculty are asked to develop and assess outcomes for their students in ways that are more systematic, consistent, collaborative, and documentable than individual efforts may have been in the past” (The Academic Senate for California Community Colleges, 2010, p. 2). Developing and assessing outcomes takes practice and requires appropriate training and support (Svinicki, 2002; Theall, 2002; Wergin, 2002). Furthermore, faculty need training in both assessment methodology and pedagogy in order to effectively measure SLOs and make improvements in teaching and learning.

Responses from the survey and the document analysis indicated that professional development for SLO assessment requires ongoing training through multiple venues. Because of this continuous need, *colleges should connect SLO assessment efforts with Professional Development Committees/Centers on campus*. A third of the interview participants discussed the need for professional development related to assessment methodology which is in alignment with documents from the National Institute for Learning Outcomes Assessment (NILOA) which indicate that pedagogy is a key professional development topic.

CIOs place greater importance on SLO assessment but do not report a need for resources and professional development. Based on quantitative analysis, there was an inverse relationship in the importance and implementation of SLO assessment and professional development and the resources needed to support SLO assessment according to CIOs. As administrators, CIOs recognized the importance of SLO assessment, but did not recognize the need

Viewpoint

www.learningoutcomesassessment.org

for adequate resources and professional development to support SLO assessment efforts. In Chaplot's (2010) study identifying facilitators and inhibitors to assessment, one of the inhibitors to assessment is the "lack of administrative foresight and inadequate resources" (Chaplot, 2010, p. 38). Successful SLO implementation includes appropriate and consistent resources such as release time for an SLO Coordinator and/or a faculty team, and support from the institutional research office. Participants indicated that "administration needed to build value to the process by publicly and consistently giving it a high priority and supporting that endorsement by allocating appropriate resources" (Chaplot, 2010, p. 39). A reduction in resources can communicate declining support and thus lessened importance of SLO assessment.

In order to address this incongruity, *colleges should align priorities of SLO assessment and related professional development with the appropriate resources and training.* Principle Nine from the *Guiding Principles for SLO Assessment* describes, "Effective outcomes assessment requires a college commitment of sufficient staff and resources" (The Academic Senate for California Community Colleges, 2010, p. 22). Faculty have a primary responsibility for assessment efforts but cannot meet this responsibility without adequate resources and support. CIOs are charged with meeting accreditation standards and SLO assessment implementation, yet they do not recognize the need for increased SLO resources and professional development. There is a disconnect in the importance of SLO assessment and the resources needed to support the efforts.

In order to move toward a culture of inquiry, *faculty need time, space, and opportunities for open discussions about student learning so they can improve student success in a safe environment.* Lisa, one of the CIOs in the study, described her college administration's focus on creating a culture of safety around assessment results and that negative SLO data would not be connected to a negative evaluation. Additionally, survey respondents described responding to assessment challenges by framing discussions around teaching and learning rather than mandates.

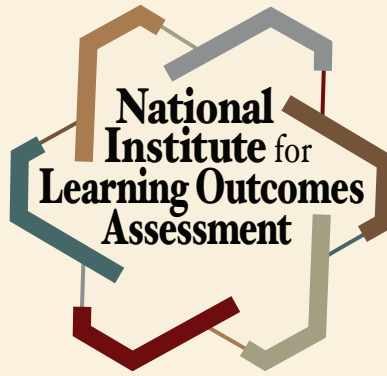
This study also confirmed findings by others that successful SLO implementation requires resources, institutional support, professional development for assessment, and an organizational culture that fosters assessment and inquiry over compliance. Faculty need to be equipped with professional development to identify learning outcomes and measure them appropriately. Reviewing SLO data also requires resources such as training and support from the research office. Discussing data can be a vulnerable activity; it necessitates time and space—in a safe environment—for discussions and collaboration with other faculty. Identifying improvements and implementing them may also require further professional development in pedagogy and instructional methodologies to address the learning gaps uncovered in the assessment cycle.

The full study can be accessed at <https://escholarship.org/uc/item/4d63p410>.

In order to move toward a culture of inquiry, faculty need time, space, and opportunities for open discussions about student learning so they can improve student success in a safe environment.

References:

- Chaplot, P. (2010). Implementation and sustainability of learning assessment efforts: Facilitators and inhibitors. *Journal of Applied Research in the Community College*, 17(2), 35–43.
- Gardiner, L. F. (2002). Student development: Monitoring the quality of learning and development. In R. M. Diamond (Ed.) *Field guide to academic leadership: A publication of the National Academy for Academic Leadership* (pp. 89–109). San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Svinicki, M. (2002). Faculty development: An investment for the future. In R. M. Diamond (Ed.) *Field guide to academic leadership: A publication of the National Academy for Academic Leadership* (pp. 211–221). San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- The Academic Senate for California Community Colleges. (2010, Fall). *Guiding principles of SLO assessment*. Sacramento, CA: Author.
- Theall, M. (2002). Evaluation and assessment: An institutional context. In R. M. Diamond (Ed.) *Field guide to academic leadership: A publication of the National Academy for Academic Leadership* (pp. 225–240). San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Wergin, J. F. (2002). Academic Program Review. In R. M. Diamond (Ed.) *Field guide to academic leadership: A publication of the National Academy for Academic Leadership* (pp. 241–255). San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.



Please Cite As:

Apigo, M. J. (2020, July). *Moving from compliance to a culture of inquiry: Student learning outcome implementation and professional development in california community colleges*. Urbana, IL: University of Illinois and Indiana University, National Institute for Learning Outcomes Assessment.

Follow us on social media:



@NILOA_web



@LearningOutcomesAssessment

Sign up to receive our monthly **NILOA Newsletter** and stay up to date with our research and publications.

