



Assessing Student Learning

A Newsletter
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ITL Builds on Past Efforts



CSU
Institute
for
Teaching
and
Learning

Since the late 1980s, the CSU has devoted considerable attention to the assessment of student learning, including Academic Senate and trustee support for principles of assessment of learning outcomes. Recognizing these previous system initiatives, the current interest of accrediting agencies, including WASC, in assessment of learning, reports of campus progress, and the emphasis in the Cornerstones report, at its May 1997 retreat the board of the Institute for Teaching and Learning (ITL), in partnership with the Division of Academic Affairs in the CSU Chancellor's Office, designated student learning outcomes as its highest priority and committed itself to a multi-year program to advance the identification and assessment of what CSU students should know and be able to do when they graduate from our campuses.

Some campuses and degree programs are making notable progress toward improving the assessment of their students' learning. The arduous task of specifying the knowledge and skills imparted by a university education has been undertaken with the most success in degree programs that prepare students for specific professions, such as nursing, health disciplines, education, engineering, and business—largely because those professions require licensure or are sanctioned by special accrediting agencies that ask for precise outcomes. Progress also has been made by other disciplines in the arts and sciences.

Nevertheless, it is universally acknowledged that defining and measuring the outcomes of a university education is a very difficult endeavor. It requires the faculty of a degree program to work collaboratively and collectively to specify the desired learning; it requires feedback from students, alumni, and employers; it requires the development of effective instruments to judge whether students have met the desired outcomes. None of this is achieved easily. Therefore, the CSU has embarked on a three-to-five-year effort to build on the strong foundation already set by the statewide academic senate and individual campuses and degree programs. This effort will provide additional resources and opportunities to CSU institutions to enable us better to explain to our external audiences what is achieved by students earning a baccalaureate degree. This newsletter will highlight some of the important activities undertaken in the 1997-98 academic year.

CSU Looks at General Education Outcomes

The Academic Senate CSU, the Division of Academic Affairs of the Office of the Chancellor, and the CSU Institute for Teaching and Learning jointly sponsored a conference at the Hilton Hotel, Long Beach, on February 19-21, 1998, on the subject of General Education Learning Outcomes, Phase 1: Mathematics and Written Communication in English.

Taking the principles of Cornerstones, a CSU strategic planning framework endorsed by the Board of Trustees at its January 1998 meeting, as a mandate, the conference was the first step in a new effort to rethink what CSU graduates can be said to know and be able to do. Principle 1 of Cornerstones states, in part: "The California State University will award the baccalaureate on the basis of demonstrated learning as determined by our faculty. The CSU will state explicitly what a graduate of the California State University is expected to know, and will assure that our graduates possess a certain breadth and depth of knowledge together with a certain level of skills..."

Just what that breadth and depth of knowledge and that level of skills are will be the topic of a wide range of conversations across the CSU in the next few years, and this conference was the kick-off for those conversations.

The sponsoring organizations decided to start the discussions by looking at General Education Learning Outcomes in Mathematics and Written Communication in

English. General Education is a curricular area in which there are systemwide provisions for the CSU in trustee policy.

For the specific subjects of mathematics and written communication in English the CSU has placement standards, the Entry Level Mathematics Examination (ELM) and the English Placement Test (EPT) and,

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in conjunction with the other public sectors of higher education in California, has developed statements of Competencies Expected of Entering College Students. In addition, there are recent standards adopted by the state of California in these two subjects for high school graduates.

Each CSU campus was invited to send two teams of five persons each to the conference, one team to work on mathematics and the other on written communication in English. In order to get a wide representation of disciplines, no more than one member of each team was to be from the specific disciplinary area to be considered.

Learning outcomes in each of these subjects are important for a wide range of disciplinary areas—perhaps for all disciplines.

These teams of faculty were supplemented by academic administrators, members of the Academic Senate CSU, trustees, members of the ITL Advisory Board, and members of the Chancellor's General Education Committee, including a community college faculty member. In all there were over 240 attendees.

A highlight of the conference was a session on practices in the CSU as benchmarks given by teams from Bakersfield, Fullerton, Monterey Bay, Northridge, Pomona, San Bernardino, San Jose, San Luis Obispo, and Sonoma. From these presentations it is clear that a thoughtful study of how to develop and assess learning outcomes in many areas is already under way in the CSU.

As a follow-up to the conference, the ITL Advisory Board is working with the convenors of campus teams to design a process that might lead to a first draft of a set of learning outcomes for each of the two subject areas: mathematics and written communication. The goal is to begin a consultative and iterative process that might culminate in a set of agreed-upon outcomes.

The process might include the community colleges, which provide the CSU with the majority of its entering students. It might also involve the University of California and other institutions of higher education in the state. More information will be available at the beginning of the 1998-99 academic year.

CSU Participates in Wharton/IRHE Institutes

To enhance their efforts at assessing the outcomes of student learning, 10 CSU campuses participated in a week-long program created by the Knight Collaborative and the Wharton Institute for Research in Higher Education.

The ten CSU campuses participating were:

Bakersfield	Northridge
Dominguez Hills	Pomona
Fresno	Sacramento
Fullerton	San Bernardino
Los Angeles	Sonoma

Sponsored jointly by the campuses and the Chancellor's Office, the program allowed five-person teams from each of the 10 campuses to explore their current assessment situation and to map out a strategy to move to the next level.

All 22 CSU campuses expressed interest in participating in the

Wharton experience and indicated that substantial efforts are under way to specify what students should know and be able to do and to identify ways that knowledge and skills might be measured.

First priority for attending Wharton was accorded to campuses that had engaged most fully in the difficult and demanding task of specifying concrete outcomes of student learning rather than institutions that had employed useful assessment instruments such as surveys and focus groups but had not yet achieved consensus on the outcomes which those instruments could best measure.

The core of the Wharton program was built around a specific case study that each CSU campus brought to the Institute and which it worked on during the

breakout sessions. Together with the Wharton faculty, the staff from the Knight Collaborative worked with the campuses to sharpen understanding of their task and to begin linking some of the "process concepts" that lie at the heart of the Wharton curriculum with the kinds of assessment issues specific to both higher education and the CSU.

The Wharton program was not a conference but an exercise in strategy building. It provided an opportunity to focus on a specific set of tasks with a group of colleagues who all share some responsibility for the tasks. The real test of the program lies in whether or not the Wharton experience makes it easier to achieve the teams' stated goals back on campus.

The second annual CSU Fullerton Assessment Conference was held March 5-6, 1998, at the Marriott Hotel on the Fullerton campus. The conference was sponsored by the School of Business Administration and Economics at CSUF and attracted participants from the USA, Portugal, and Uganda. The conference sessions covered topics of interest to educators, researchers, and business managers who are involved in program evaluation and skill assessment.

The program included a workshop on measuring student writing and thinking skills, as well as sessions on assessing the outcomes of science, general education, and

business programs. The use of assessment center methods was featured in a keynote speech by Dr. Warren Bobrow, a prominent researcher and consultant. Program sessions illustrated how assessment centers are used in industry and education, and how to assure reliability of these methods. An international focus was provided by a delegation of students and faculty from Uganda who spoke on higher education and its assessment in East Africa.

Dr. Trudy Banta, an internationally known expert in educational assessment, was enthusiastically received in her presentation on how to make assessment programs work in higher education. Her broad experience in the field was evident in the examples she provided from universities and community colleges. Her availability for individual discussion throughout her stay was appreciated as well.

Conference at CSU Fullerton Focuses on Skill Assessment

Assessment:

Reservations and Affirmations

Recent activities have shown that there is a strong foundation for the assessment of student learning outcomes in the CSU. Nevertheless, it must be admitted that there are reservations about the idea of assessment. Some of the resistance is based on practical concerns: assessment is expensive in terms of personnel costs and direct costs; faculty must devote time to assessment that would otherwise be expended in teaching or research; surveys, tests, and other assessment instruments must be created, printed, distributed, and results tabulated—all of which costs money. Some fear that results of assessment will be used in unfair and inappropriate ways to make comparisons among individuals or institutions and to decide who gets funding and who does not.

These are very real apprehensions, yet most of the doubts expressed by faculty center on the basic premise of assessment itself: that the *outcomes* of education must be *specified* and *measured*. The underlined words in the previous sentence indicate the areas of dissension.

First of all, some question an *outcome-oriented* approach to assessment. Some disciplines are explicitly *outcome-oriented*; others are not. A student chooses to major in nursing or teacher

education in order to learn a body of knowledge and a set of skills that will enable that individual to function effectively in a professional setting—clearly outcome-oriented programs. But why does a student major in the humanities: in history or English or art? In some cases the motivation is outcome-oriented; that is, to become a teacher or to obtain preparation necessary for entrance to law school. In many other instances, the outcome is more ill-defined and ambiguous. The critics note, furthermore, that not only the discipline itself but the basic activities of the field are concerned with means rather than with ends: why does a person read *Moby Dick*? To learn about whales? To imaginatively participate in a dangerous sea voyage? To appreciate the aesthetic qualities of a literary work? Or simply for the pleasure of reading? In other words, an activity like reading novels or creating art is as much concerned with process as it is with outcome. Thus, to impose an outcome-oriented approach on all academic programs is fundamentally at variance with the nature of some disciplines.

A second group questions whether outcomes can or ought to be *specified*. To identify a common set of outcomes for all 100 sections of a GE social science course, for example, is to curtail

the autonomy and creativity of individual instructors. Dictating the knowledge and skills that a student must master in effect dictates what must be taught in all sections of a course allowing only moderate room for individuality, at best, and, at worst, impinging on academic freedom. According to those opposed to assessment, a set of uniform outcomes promotes the depersonalization of higher education and emphasizes curriculum—the courses, themselves—to the near exclusion of instructors—the individuals who teach the courses. Furthermore, within the academic disciplines, it is often the case that very few people can agree on which outcomes ought to be specified.

The third objection to assessment comes from those who doubt whether outcomes can be *measured*. With its strongly quantitative connotations, the word “measure” evokes images of yardsticks, thermometers, scales, calculators, and computers spewing reams of paper crisscrossed with tables and charts. Thus, outcomes such as “appreciate cultural diversity” or “acquire a greater understanding of human character” appear to be singularly inappropriate for conventional measurement instruments like exams and surveys.

These three objections are real and legitimate concerns that cannot and should not be lightly dismissed. Moreover, they actually help to impede a pell-mell rush toward simplistic but expedient forms of assessment. Nevertheless, although the

arguments against assessment contribute to a vigorous debate about the objects, the effects, and the methods of assessment and thus help to mitigate thoughtless excesses, faculty have put forward other perspectives to be considered as well.

On the matter of *outcomes*: When the faculty of an art department, for example, consider the learning outcomes they expect of their majors, they are not deciding the end and purposes of art in general; instead, they are trying to define what the art majors at a specific institution at a specific place and time should know, believe, and be able to do. Even if a discipline itself is not outcome-oriented, a college most definitely IS outcome-oriented. The culmination of a student's college career is a diploma—a certificate, a piece of paper. It's the job of assessment to define as precisely as possible what that piece of paper means.

For over a decade, the topic of assessing the outcomes of student learning has generated controversy, heated discussion, lively debate, antagonism as well as enthusiasm and endorsement. What has never been questioned, however, is the centrality of student learning to the CSU's mission and the university's commitment to improving, fostering, and promoting the knowledge, skills, and abilities of its students. It is in this context that assessment takes its firmest root.

Assessment does not try to define the outcome of the social sciences or the humanities. It does try to specify what a political science major at CSU Sacramento in 1998 ought to know and be able to do when she graduates from college.

On the matter of *specifying* outcomes: The notion that it is wrong (or impossible) to specify outcomes is rooted in traditions of academe which have encouraged individual effort and discouraged collaboration. According to the strictest notions of scholarly inquiry, for example, to collaborate—to share ideas, to read and comment on each others' work, to get others' opinions—was to court charges of "plagiarism" and

to stifle autonomous achievement. Recent cultural changes, however, have promoted more collaborative efforts, have encouraged teamwork, have elevated the concept of working in groups. There is little doubt that the recent trend toward assessment is part of this effort toward group decision-making.

Specifying outcomes for a program does indeed depend on collaboration, dialogue, discussion, and conversation among diverse individual faculty members. Each faculty member, in addition to teaching his or her own courses, has to share some responsibility for an entire program. In addition to being individuals with individual courses to teach, faculty also have to become involved in collective aims for cumulative learning.

On the matter of *measuring* outcomes: Even though the word "measure" seems to imply a yardstick or a thermometer, not all measurement is quantitative. Much of it is qualitative and based on the expertise, experience, and trained judgment of faculty members. Instead of relying heavily on multiple-choice exams, in fact, the best assessments of students' learning outcomes use portfolios, capstone courses, exit interviews, and other instruments to measure the more abstract outcomes of student learning.

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Campuses Hold Assessment Workshops

Defining what is achieved by students earning a baccalaureate degree is a complex and sophisticated task. To help advance efforts toward this goal, several CSU campuses have sponsored local workshops to promote discussion of the assessment of student competencies.

Most of these efforts have involved one- or two-day university-wide efforts to disseminate information about student learning outcomes. Some examples:

CSU Dominguez Hills (March 9-10, 1998)

Karen Schilling and Karl Schilling worked with campus faculty to develop nontraditional indicators of learning outcomes to document student success.

CSU Fresno (March 6-7, 1998)

A two-day assessment event featured a panel by Ralph Wolff, Bernie Goldstein, and Fresno Provost Michael Ortiz and a workshop by Mary Senter of Central Michigan University, who presented assessment from a faculty point of view, as a means of improving student learning, rather than from an accountability perspective.

CSU Los Angeles (November 21, 1997)

Karen Maitland-Schilling of Miami University engaged the campus in a dialogue concerning the development of program-based assessment frameworks.

Cal Poly Pomona (May 13-15, 1998)

Mary Senter from Central Michigan will work with the faculty to develop assessment policies, to encourage faculty-based department outcomes assessment plans, and to define the role of the Faculty Center in assessment activities.

San Francisco State (January 27, 1998, and May 12, 1998)

Diane Halpern of CSU San Bernardino worked with departments in the College of Ethnic Studies to assess learning outcomes. In the College of Health & Human Services, Trudy Banta of Indiana University-Purdue University, Indianapolis, will work with faculty in a strategic planning process that includes establishment of outcomes.

CSU Stanislaus (June 15-19, 1998)

Jane Halonen of Alverno College will spend one week working with 12 faculty from psychology, history, and English to determine ways of assessing student learning.

The CSU is committed to providing expertise needed by campuses as they explore new ways of defining and measuring student learning outcomes. Resources are available to enable campuses to retain experts in the identification and assessment of learning outcomes to provide specific consultation for CSU campuses. A list of possible consultants and forms for requesting funds for external consultants are available in the Chancellor's Office.

Sample Statements of Outcomes for Degree Programs

Faculty have indicated that the most helpful information to them in beginning or in making progress toward outcomes assessment derives from excellent examples and models from sister campuses in the CSU.

CSU campuses have therefore provided materials to share with others in the system. These include statements of measurable objectives for specific programs (business, psychology, art, recreation administration, etc.) and statements of measurable objectives for general education.

These will be published in a resource book on student learning outcomes in print form by May 1, 1998, and on the CSU website by August 1, 1998.

Although there are many aspects of outcomes assessment, the current draft of the resource book and website focuses on two types: (1) statements of the outcomes of degree programs or majors, and (2) the outcomes of general education. It is an attempt to show how various disciplines and departments have attempted to define what we expect of students when they graduate with a college degree.

CSU Learns from National “Best Practices”

Although many universities in the United States have been engaged in defining and assessing student learning outcomes, the dissemination of effective systems of assessment has thus far been limited to conference presentations and to a few books and journal articles. This has made it difficult for CSU faculty to learn about programs in which learning outcomes have been developed in a thoughtful, comprehensive, judicious manner.

Therefore, the CSU recently became involved in two projects to provide more in-depth study of the best that has been done in the field of outcomes assessment. Facilitated by the American Productivity & Quality Center (APQC), these two projects have allowed CSU faculty and administrators to examine carefully the “best practices” of universities across the country.

The first project focused on best practices in measuring institutional performance outcomes, while the second emphasized best practices in measuring student learning outcomes. The format for both projects is similar: the participants decide what they want to study, identify who seems to be doing it well, make site visits to these institutions, identify the practices that seem to contribute to success, and discuss and disseminate their findings.

In the first study—on measuring institutional outcomes—the participants looked closely at five colleges and universities (Alverno College, Truman State University, University of Central England, University of Phoenix, and Indiana University-Purdue University, Indianapolis). By researching these institutions, the study developed nine key findings about how performance measures are best developed, how they are best used, and what cultural factors are most likely to support the use of performance measures.

The second study—on measuring student learning—is currently under way. CSU participants are visiting institutions such as Ball State University in Muncie, Indiana, and Emporia State University in Emporia, Kansas, which have been identified as having successful programs for assessing learning outcomes. At these sites, participants will study three specific aspects of assessment: planning for assessment, deciding how best to assess, and managing the assessment process.

Through these benchmarking studies, CSU campuses have been able to identify which universities are having the most success with assessment, to learn from these best practices, and to adapt them to the individual CSU campus’s culture.

Faculty in Kinesiology/ Physical Education Define Competencies

Gaining systemwide faculty consensus on what the graduates of an academic degree program should know and be able to do is a difficult, demanding task. Yet it was one undertaken by CSU faculty in kinesiology/physical education during a two-day conference held in March 1998 at Cal Poly Pomona.

At this event, almost 60 kinesiology/physical education faculty from 18 CSU campuses met to begin defining the competencies that should be achieved by graduates in the discipline.

Through a combination of breakout sessions and plenaries, the group tried to define entry competencies to the junior year, graduation competencies for all majors, and graduation competencies for undergraduate specializations, such as biomechanics and exercise physiology.

The materials generated at the meeting at Pomona are being synthesized by a post-conference report committee. A draft document will then be reviewed

by the system's department chairs in kinesiology/physical education for analysis and comment. This revised draft will then be distributed to conference participants, after which it will be given to all CSU faculty in this discipline for their feedback. The statement of exit competencies in physical education/kinesiology is intended to be a guide and a possible model—not a prescription—for individual CSU campus programs.

The systemwide conference was organized by the department chairs in kinesiology/physical education for the sharing of ideas and viewpoints. The workshop program was led and directed by Rob Carlson, department chair at San Diego State. In addition to Carlson, the conference steering committee included Melva Irvin of CSU Los Angeles and Terry Rizzo of CSU San Bernardino. Conference manager was Perky Stromer of Cal Poly Pomona.

ITL Board Considers Discipline-Based Activities

To stimulate thinking about what students should know and be able to do when they earn a baccalaureate degree in a discipline, the ITL Board is considering ways to promote systemwide discussion in the disciplines.

The board is exploring opportunities that would enable faculty members to discuss ways of developing outcome statements in specific disciplines in undergraduate degree programs. More information will be forthcoming in fall 1998.

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