

PROPOSAL: CREATING AN ASSESSMENT CYCLE

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INTRODUCTION

What is in this report

This report provides

- a summary of practices and procedures for, and experiences with, SLO assessment across all instructional departments at CSM (student services and learning centers are not included; they will be considered in a separate, future report);
- a brief discussion of what problems these practices and procedures reveal;
- recommendations for creating a more manageable and meaningful assessment cycle.

Background

The College Assessment Committee is committed to improving support for our current assessment process (Goal 2, CAC Institutional Plan, 5/15). Our primary goal is to improve CSM's assessment process, by making it **less onerous and more meaningful**.

We also need to make sure that our SLO data collection remains compliant as standards evolve. ACCJC has added a new disaggregation requirement to their most recent standards (June 2014), which will mean, for some departments, changing how SLO data is collected.

Where we are now

To improve what we do as an institution, and for the College Assessment Committee to help faculty effectively, we first needed to *find out* what we do as an institution.

We needed to get a clear picture of how faculty and staff think about SLOs, what they use them for, how they collect data, how they assess, and how they feel this process could be improved.

And we need to do this for instructional courses and programs, academic services, and support services.

This report focuses first on the instructional courses and programs; learning centers and support services will be next.

Method

Interviews with SLO coordinators listed on Program Review documents. In all, some thirty-three (33) interviews were conducted, on a total of thirty-five (35) departments offering degree programs, certificates, and/or stand-alone courses. (A few coordinators were not available for interview.)

Questions

These focused primarily on the aspects of instructors' course and program assessments that will help us to establish a single SLO assessment cycle, such as methods and frequency of assessments, anonymity, utility, and general experience with SLOs. Instructors were also sounded for interest in an "assessment" day, and to give feedback on their experience of the assessment process generally. (Questionnaire attached.)

I. SUMMARY OF PRACTICES, PROCEDURES AND ATTITUDES

SLO Practices and Procedures

Here is a snapshot of what we found out about how faculty assess student learning outcomes.

- Courses and programs are overwhelmingly in compliance. Other than a few programs that are in flux (new faculty, etc.) all of our courses and programs have SLOs and a history of data collection.
- For most faculty, SLO assessments look a lot like grading. 90% of respondents conduct SLOs on a course-by-course basis. 66% of respondents conduct SLO assessments at least once a year, with most of these (48%) conducting assessments every semester, on every student, like grades. In the majority of cases, individual classroom faculty assessed their

own students, then passed on the data to the SLO coordinator for the department, who maintains the data. 75% of faculty drew their SLO assessments from quizzes, essays, or other assignments that also formed part of a student's graded work. 72% of respondents said that individual instructors assessed student work on their own, again like grading, rather than in some collaborative process. At least 42% use a sliding scale to calibrate levels of student achievement of SLOs, comparable to grades. And student anonymity was only important to a handful (15%) of respondents. Finally, most faculty identified their "target rate" as their passing grades (i.e., they expected rates of SLO success and passing grades to be the same).

- But a substantial minority of faculty have differentiated SLO assessments from grading routines in a variety of ways. For some departments, SLO assessments are a thing apart from grading, both in frequency, method and purpose. 24% of respondents assess their courses every two or three years. And for 18%, SLO assessment is a time-consuming group activity outside of the ordinary grading process, most often (15%) using work from a sample of students. The method of assessment also is in some cases set apart from the student's usual graded work. 12% of faculty use a standardized ungraded quiz developed for the course, often a pre-and post-test designed to reflect progress as much as student success. 15% of faculty use self-reported student surveys rather than student work. Finally, just three respondents (>1%) assess specific SLOs in isolation, or assess SLOs in a particular category across different courses. Notably, a large number of faculty (42%) evaluated SLO performance with an up-or-down vote (yes/no) rather than a grading-style calibration.
- Faculty do not generally use standardized capstone courses or assignments to gauge student learning. Other than in programs which prepare students for success in external exams or certification (e.g., Nursing, Cosmetology, Administration of Justice etc.), few programs assign shared exit exams, quizzes, assignments or other demonstrations of proficiency that could act as a capstone in a course or program. (However, some departments do administer a set "SLO" quiz.)
- There's a widespread need for better ways to assess programs. In those departments that prepare students for a specific board exam or for placement in specific jobs (i.e., Nursing, Cosmetology, Addiction Studies), faculty do have meaningful ways of assessing the success of their programs: reviewing success rates in external exams, or following up with employers. Academic programs typically rely on student surveys, but these don't produce information that faculty can do much with, largely because the sample sizes are

so small and because they involve students self-reporting.

Experiences with SLO assessment

Faculty were also asked about their experience of SLOs – how useful they felt SLOs had been, and how SLOs might be improved. Here is a summary of responses.

- SLO assessment provides useful information in a few departments. Two respondents said that SLO assessments had contributed some real information about student learning not captured in other measures (rates of retention, success, transfer, grades, etc.) One program (P.E.) includes many courses where SLOs measure concrete achievements that are, indeed, the real purpose of the course, but can't be included in the grade (i.e., specific indicators of fitness, like body composition, weight, etc.) In Electrical Technology, SLOs helped specify vital SKAs, all of which are required for the students' career preparation. Others reported good experiences with SLO assessment at other institutions. Three respondents said that writing SLOs helped them create a coherent and cohesive curriculum, with a logical course sequence. Less important, but still positive, were the many respondents who said that while SLOs didn't tell them anything they didn't already know, SLOs did confirm expected patterns of strength and weakness behind the grades. Overall, six respondents, or 18%, responded somewhere between lukewarm and positive.
- But the far more common experience is this: SLOs have not contributed useful data, or opportunities to improve student learning. Here are the main reasons, according to faculty, that SLO assessments are not helpful:
 - a) *SLO assessments don't bring anything new to our existing methods of assessment.* We already have measures of student learning: grades, results in external exams, rates of transfer, persistence, retention and so on. SLOs contribute little other than a breakdown of the patterns of strength and weakness behind the grade, which are usually already familiar to instructors, and in some programs (e.g. Nursing), already supplied by superior metrics.
 - b) *SLOs don't focus on the most interesting student population.* Some faculty have interpreted the phrasing of SLOs, as defining what *successful* students can do, to mean that they should only assess students who pass the class. But most faculty are more interested in unsuccessful students, and feel that exploring the reasons why students drop or fail offers more potential for program and course improvement.

- c) *Not all important outcomes are measurable.* SLOs must describe the knowledge, skills or abilities that students can readily demonstrate at the end of the semester. But many important goals can't be readily or easily measured. Life-long learning, for instance, used to figure prominently in our language; but since a propensity for life-long learning can't be assessed at the end of a course or program of study, it now is rarely mentioned. Creativity and critical thinking, too, remain famously difficult (read: impossible) to assess in a standardized way, despite strenuous efforts to the contrary.
- d) *SLOs tend to prioritize methods of data collection and analysis for which faculty are not trained, and which are largely inappropriate to our goals and student body.* Most of our departments don't generate very much data – one or two teachers teach one or two sections of one or two courses. But even where we *do* have enough students to generate something akin to "big data," namely lots of students in lots of sections, we don't have the expertise. Most of our assessments are home-made, and few of us know anything about confidence intervals, power analyses, p-values and so on. Many faculty feel that they are supposed to apply the rigorous protocols of scientific research to the business of SLO data analysis, and feel ill-equipped to do so.
- e) *Direct assessment of student performance in programs is virtually impossible.* Some programs prepare students directly for job placements (i.e., Addiction Studies), or for state- or board-administered exams (i.e., Nursing, Cosmetology) and thus have some concrete ways to measure the effectiveness of their programs. Academic programs, however, typically serve transfer students, few of whom take a degree with us. There's no way to assess our programs by tracking individual students.
- f) *All of this not-very-helpful assessment takes up a tremendous amount of time and effort.* Along with conducting assessments of questionable value, faculty must collect the data and enter it into Tracdat (about which not one user had a good word). Many coordinators expressed frustration at having to train adjunct faculty in SLO requirements, then having to track them down to retrieve their assessment data. Many faculty pointed out that since their department consisted of just one person, and perhaps two or three courses, they really didn't need the big-data approach that SLO assessment appears to require.
- g) *Ultimately, the goal and scope of SLO assessment is unclear.* We have been working hard to comply with requirements to do SLO assessments. But compliance is difficult

when the purpose of the mandate is opaque. What are SLOs for? How can we make use of them?

II. DISCUSSION OF PROBLEMS

Problems

Here are some of the issues that we should address, to improve assessment on our campus.

- There are few clear policies, institutional routines, or helpful infrastructure for SLOs. There are no shared deadlines, no established policies, few answers to many faculty questions, and no common exploration of purpose for assessment. Faculty have all created their SLO assessments from scratch, not only inventing their own wheel, but paving their own road and plotting their own journey. The lack of a single routine makes SLO reporting a practical headache also, and amplifies the work for everyone. Administrators must keep track of literally scores of assessment cycles – it is as if everyone had their own grading deadlines or their own academic calendar. And faculty struggle to keep track of their own assessments, and nag colleagues to provide data.
- We are not integrating the many meaningful things we do into a routine of assessment. We engage continually in assessment, that is, in looking for ways to improve student learning, beyond our individual classrooms and disciplines. This is well documented in our many initiatives – Project Change, WEZ, Mana, Umoja, Puente, the BSI, the Learning Center, and so on – all of which began with faculty conversations about improving student learning. Surely this is the kind of productive self-scrutiny, the kind of perpetual effort towards improvement, that assessment is supposed to support. But the reporting requirements of SLOs feel like extraneous impediments, rather than infrastructure.
- Faculty do not have enough time. This is a perennial and common complaint that needs to be taken seriously. Maybe complying with reporting requirements for SLOs will take only half an hour – but that half an hour comes at the expense of two students, or an improved lesson plan, or more considered feedback on a paper. Faculty are drowning in administrative obligations. If we ask them to do anything, it had better be for a good reason, and they had better have the best available support.
- We need to make some improvements to remain compliant with changing accreditation reporting requirements. We will need to explore methods of capturing SLO data that can be meaningfully disaggregated (i.e., where the individual student's G-number is recorded along with the result).

Discussion: A history of assessment

What is assessment?

Before considering what to do about SLOs in particular, let us look for a moment at the context in which this requirement evolved.

"Assessment" and "SLO assessment" are often thought of as interchangeable, partly because of the way accreditation requirements are framed. But it's worth pointing out that the assessment movement preceded the SLO mandate by at least twenty years. It began, as noted above, with very different and often competing concerns, which have left their imprint both on accreditation requirements, and on our faculty practices today.

Assessment can serve two related, but distinct purposes. One is "accountability" in student learning, a major theme fueled initially by reports such as *A Nation At Risk* (1981) but continuing unbroken into the present. The story here is that despite good grades, students are not really learning at all, and so faculty must research their effectiveness through other and more objective ways of gauging student learning –for collaborative or anonymized assessments, or standardized tests, or some other way of avoiding the biases that apparently render grades a meaningless measure of student learning. This suggests methods of research modelled on those used in social science, where strict protocols control for bias, and special mathematical formulae govern how data are interpreted. Unsurprisingly, this theme reflects external anxieties about student preparation for the world and the workplace, and is largely fueled by government reports and federal requirements.

Another purpose, however, is "continuous improvement," a term that suggests the need for culture of endless experimentation and collaboration, rather than self-scrutiny. The story here is not that students aren't learning anything, but that there is always room for improvement; we can always find new ways to strengthen student learning, improve our curriculum, experiment with new strategies, attract and retain new student populations. An important part of teaching requires us to keep looking for what we might do differently. While this approach too should be based on evidence of student learning, it suggests something less formal, more experimental and collaborative – something, indeed, like the kinds of activities that a large majority of faculty engage in regularly, as part of their practice. Learning communities, teaching circles, and initiatives like Service Learning or Writing Across The Curriculum all reflect the kind of work done in the name of this model of "assessment." These efforts reflect some of the concerns that faculty brought to the assessment movement – concerns that the undergraduate student experience is too discombobulated, a sort of smorgasboard of apparently unrelated courses that cultivate what has been nicknamed "bulimic learning," and that faculty need to collaborate more to create a coherent, meaningful educational experience for students.

Assessment at CSM – and beyond

In fact, we have a history at CSM of fostering this kind of assessment culture. Our Center for Academic Excellence, an Academic Senate initiative, exists to provide a forum to "enhance pedagogy and student support through innovation and collaboration, so as to increase student success, both inside and outside the classroom" (<http://collegeofsanmateo.edu/cae/>). The CAE has itself evolved from the Center for the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning, a 2007 faculty initiative that similarly sought to give faculty a space for "core practices:"

- Framing questions
- Gathering and exploring evidence
- Trying out and refining new insights in the classroom
- Going public... in ways that others can learn from.

"President's ENews," September 2007, http://www.collegeofsanmateo.edu/prezenews/2007-09-18_scholarship.html)

However, at the same time, SLOs became a major feature of accreditation. In March 2005, CSM's SLO coordinator held an all-college meeting to explain the new requirement. Over the next years, faculty attended brainstorming sessions, learned how to write SLOs, revised SLOs, played with different methods of assessment, coped with a Hydra of multiplying requirements (writing SLOs for courses, programs, labs; revising what wasn't working; mapping; brainstorming GEs; filling in a succession of reporting forms; using Tracdat; assessing GEs; and so on).

In many ways, SLOs reflect a mixture of the different purposes of assessment.

- Some of ACCJC's SLO requirements seem to reflect a desire for accountability. Many requirements seem to cast SLO data as a sort of detailed version of grading, rather than the kinds of occasional reports generated by the four "core practices" above. For instance, we must disaggregate SLOs, as well as to discuss trends, changes or improvements in course, program, and GE SLO data. All of this suggests a lot of information, not particular reports addressing particular issues or research. Also, the fact that every single campus activity, except perhaps for landscaping, must justify itself in terms of its relevance to student learning, suggests a desire for accountability.
- Some requirements, however, stress the "continuous improvement" goals that are more pertinent to the work that faculty do. For instance, the need to align course outcomes to program outcomes, and to general education outcomes is intended to promote a more

coherent educational experience, and to strengthen student learning by interdisciplinary collaboration. Writing SLOs can be helpful for ensuring a coherent program, and across disciplines, SLOs can help clarify the links between courses.

III. RECOMMENDATIONS

To create a clear cycle of assessment, we should do the following:

One: Model SLO data collection on grading.

We all record grades for each student, each semester, that reflect his or her proficiency in the SLOs for the course. So the easiest, and most helpful way to think of and record students' SLO competence is to treat it as an extension of grading. This could take the form of a multiple choice quiz embedded in Web Access, or extra boxes added to a gradebook, or extra boxes to check when entering a student grade.

The purpose here is two-fold. On the one hand, we need disaggregatable data. On the other, we need to not waste time on a form of data collection which most of us can make little use of. Although treating SLOs like grades sounds like more work, it should ultimately be *less* work.

Two: Create clear policies and procedures, and provide ample administrative support for faculty.

While different disciplines must necessarily require different methods of assessment, it is helpful not to ask faculty to decide every aspect of SLOs for themselves. The college should arrive at clear policies about how often to conduct SLO assessment, how to distinguish SLOs from course objectives, and what methods work best. The college should also provide plenty of administrative support, such as forms, routine reminders, and help – just as we do with census, grading, and other administrative tasks.

Three: Lobby for well-integrated online reporting system for SLO results that is easy for faculty to use.

Right now, most faculty keep ongoing grades either on paper, or in Gradebook or WebAccess; they input final grades in WebSmart; and the SLO results are recorded in Tracdat. But these three activities are really different faces of the same thing. Going forward, some faculty may want to data-tag assignments in Canvas to record outcomes automatically. Or they might record their SLO assessments as an extension of grading a capstone assignment, and thus be looking at the "Enter Grades Here" page in WebSmart. It would

make sense, therefore, for SLO outcomes to be recorded either where we enter ongoing grades (Canvas) or where we enter final grades (WebSmart).

Four: Create a routine for assessment, and make time for assessment activities, through specifically allocated flex days, with support for faculty to make them productive and meaningful, and integrating these activities with Program Review.

Faculty consistently report that they would like more *time*, and more collaboration, between and inside departments. And while we can collect SLO data much more routinely, *analyzing* that data – talking about where the gaps are, how are programs are doing, and so on – takes time.

We have something like five flex days a year, and a Center for Academic Excellence dedicated to promoting interdisciplinary initiatives, sharing best practices, and so on. Why not allocate one of these flex days, each semester, to the "core practices" of the scholarship of teaching and learning?

Suggestions: each semester, faculty could choose from a menu:

- Conduct meaningful but time-consuming assessments (i.e., group norming)
- join a GE-SLO group;
- propose an issue to discuss, research or experiment, inside or across disciplines;
- if it's a Program Review year, review course- and program-level SLO results, as well as any other relevant material, in preparation for Program Review (there is no reason why course and program assessment can't be combined);
- Follow up on previous discussions, experiments or research by sharing results.

In short: we should reclaim assessment as part of our professional practice that is routine, calendared, and documented – but also actually meaningful, collaborative, and responding to concerns and questions at our campus.