

Thinking about the consequences of actions: Implementing outcomes assessment and its sustainability in the community college

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Introduction

Similar to the Alverno College Faculty (1994) study, this study examines the question of how to keep the momentum and focus on student learning and appropriate assessment at a larger community college in California (Mt. San Antonio College). This is done by examining whether faculty allowed “student assessment [to exist] to enable each student’s learning to become more effective and expansive” (Alverno College Faculty Study p. 88) and whether faculty was allowed to make curricular or other changes.

Asking faculty to change their way of doing things in the classroom in an environment of academic freedom is a complex endeavor. How successful was the college 7 years after its implementation of student learning outcomes?

Research Design

This qualitative study examined data from the assessment of over 1,200 courses at a California community college during May 2011 using a thematic review process of the 'Use of Results' section (i.e., closing the loop component) from Nichols' 5-Column Model.

A second component of the study included discussions with employees during an open forum, as well as discussions with academic deans during a closed meeting.

Results – Use of Results

During assessment of courses, there are several steps in the process. These steps include:

- (1) defining the SLO,
- (2) setting the criteria for success (e.g., 70% of students will be able to master this SLO) and deciding what will be assessed and how,
- (3) compiling the data into the summary section and noting if the criteria for success was met and
- (4) providing an evaluation of what was learned and how it could be used for curricular and pedagogical means (e.g., Use of Results).

The results indicated that while some faculty were stating that they were going to be doing some curricular or pedagogical changes because of the assessment results, the majority of the information reviewed showed no such examination of the data. At times there was an unclear direction for how the results were informative and at times the repetition of the same, or almost same, comment in multiple courses made it impossible to say that faculty had taken the process seriously for improving student learning.

Examples of poorly thought-out use of results comments include the following:

“Keep up the good work!”

“Enter date that is consistent with SLO entry.”

“Test will be re-done. Add new SLO of discovering dominant learning modality.” (This same statement was repeated for multiple courses)

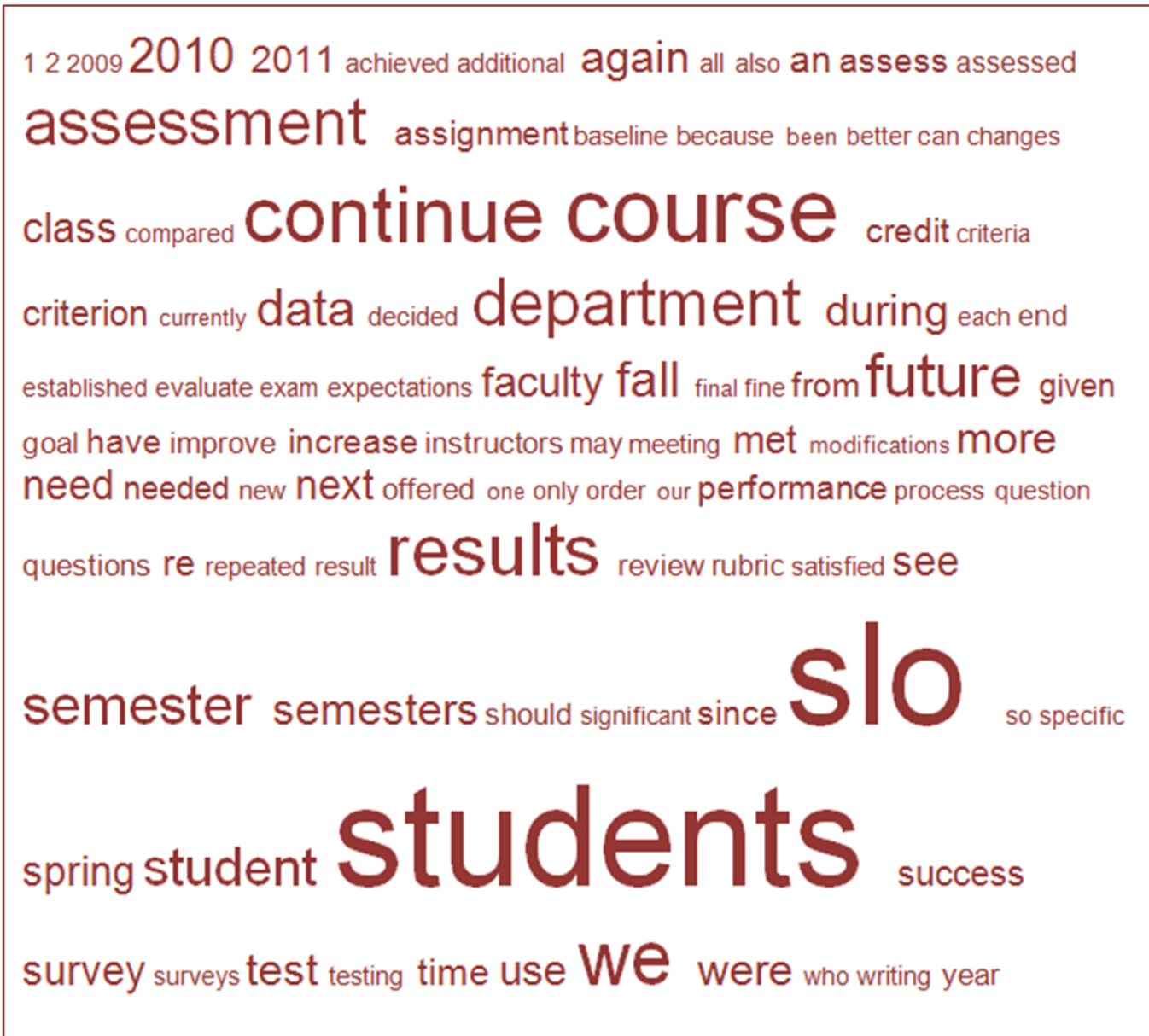
Some examples of good use of results statements include the following:

“In order to better prepare students for the 50 question SLO assessment given at the end of the semester, the French faculty decided to create and administer 15 to 20 questions M/C quizzes to test students' cultural competency at the end of each chapter studied during the semester. The French faculty agreed to create interactive multiple choice quizzes on Blackboard for each chapter and for the final. The goal was met because of these actions.

“In order to improve student outcomes on the final exam, a number of things are suggested. Faculty can ensure that the exam is written clearly so that learners understand the goal. Additionally, the instructor can offer a variety of questions. Faculty can also provide students with additional in-class review to ensure that students are prepared for the exam.”

“Labeling of the x-axis received the lowest percent of success with only 42% of students correctly labeling the x-axis with the correct values. Although this seemed low, we realized that there were other factors that led to this conclusion. Some students did not label all five values, but showed five tick marks with the correct period. It was obvious they knew there were other values to label, but it was unclear whether they knew how to find them. Some students gave the incorrect period, and as a result labeled the axis incorrectly. The Math committee will discuss ways to word the rubric for the SLO. In particular, we should reword the rubric to separately assess the student's knowledge of the period and correct labeling of the x-axis.”

The QRS NVivo 9.0 software program allows one to create a quick view of the frequency of words within a document. Below is the Cloud view for the use of results document. The listing is alphabetized with the larger the font used the more frequently the words/numbers were found in the file.



Results – Assessment Pulse and Deans Session

It is commonly known that faculty members are not enamored with the outcomes assessment process. Mt. San Antonio College employees were invited to attend an open meeting called the Assessment Pulse Roundtable on April 29, 2011. The purpose of the open meeting was to gather their thoughts on specific areas of student learning outcomes assessment at the college. Seven questions were asked relating to the level of engagement of the campuses faculty in the assessment process. Attendance for the two-hour event comprised of 24 faculty members, 1 professional expert, 2 classified members, and 11 managers for a total of 38 employees. Overall, it was clear that the group felt that SLO assessment was not a natural, everyday occurrence at the college. Faculty felt that they were just doing it for external accountability and did not see value in measuring SLOs.

It was interesting to note that the related but different process on campus of measuring general education outcomes (GEOs) was more valued than the SLO process. Why did faculty value one over the other? The thought was that the GEO process included many opportunities for faculty to collaborate and dialogue about the GEOs and the use of results. The GEO Plan and Timeline had this interactive, and to some degree, interdependent activity built into the process.

During another session, the academic deans indicated that the value faculty saw in the process was minimal in the beginning because it was forced upon them as part of an external accountability issue (e.g., accreditation). The faculty members were told to assess their courses and they were to examine the percentages that were achieved in each component of the process. For example 70% of courses were assessed. They were to compare this percent to that found in the SLO Plan and Timeline. What was lacking, as part of the SLO Plan and Timeline, was a clear process to bring together faculty members for discussions about the results and how to use the results as it was done for the GEOs.

As of now, there are some departments that are using the SLO assessments for the intended purposes. Alas, there are still many that are not.

Discussion

While the college's actions to achieve external accreditation were valid, in fact the actions were missing the last piece – dialogue about the use of the results. The college was focused on mandates when it should have been focused on what faculty would like to know with an eye toward achieving the mandate as a natural progression. The problem was that the college was behind on its accomplishments (and an accrediting agency visit was imminent) and thus this method for achieving the accreditation requirements was used.

Bresciani's work closely relates to Gallagher (2008), Long (2008), Somerville (2008) and Chaplot's (2010) work. Bresciani found that, focusing on the use of the results piece:

“the use of results to inform curriculum design, teaching methods, means to evaluate student learning, resource re-allocations, policy discussion, and recommendations was considered integral to evaluating whether the process is effective, viable, and meaningful by the good practice institutions” (p. 36).

The results from this study relate to the literature and indicate how faculty members' level of alignment with assessment can be encouraged to change and be used in the future to help them see the value in their work and its use for improving student success and thus their teaching experiences.

Based on these findings, it is recommended that the college faculty and administrators determine how to motivate faculty. Examining the Essential Learning Outcomes (Association of American Colleges and Universities, 2010), there are several major and minor domains that have been used to align the institution's learning (Tinsley, Shockley, Whang, Thao, Rosenburg, & Simmons, 2010) – such that the following questions became important for helping to drive a culture of evidence (p. 24).

What is the critical concern/question held by the department regarding student learning that will be assessed in the coming year?

How is the critical concern/question related to the department's latest program review and program planning?

Describe how/whether/when this critical concern has been previously assessed by your department. How will this new assessment build on the previous one(s)? How will this new critical concern/question generate new information for you?

In what specific activities will the department engage in to determine which evidence will best align with the critical concern listed above?

How/when will the department gather evidence of student work? Who will be involved in this process? How will you assure that the evidence gathered is a random sample of student work?

Other recommendations for community college faculty include the following:

- Sustaining the assessment momentum should center on making it meaningful
- Keeping the focus on student learning with a direction to quality improvement

- Relating outcomes assessment to external initiatives/mandates (e.g., accreditation, USA mandates), but with an eye toward focusing the efforts on what faculty wish to learn
- Advocating for dialogue and collaborative inquiry at all stages in the process, especially with use of results.

In the future, the college's research department will further explore the use of meta-analysis to merge similar studies across courses to see the impact of the work (i.e., the effect size). The researchers have begun this work and are using a multi-college approach to form a convergence of data. The research team is also re-organizing the work of one researcher to allow for assessment support for faculty. The college is also advocating for the creation of permanent part-time assessment researchers within grant proposals to further allow for the increase in staffing support for SLO assessment.

Conclusion

As the title of this study says, it is important to think about the consequences of actions taken in any new initiative. Analyzing what happened and its impact on the college is a rather easy task for a researcher. The more challenging task, and sometimes the unappreciated task, is deciding what actions were necessary as the college embarked upon and refined its SLO assessment process. When these decisions were made, they were made in a collaborative, thoughtful manner with the full knowledge of the current information at hand. Sometimes that information changed over time, thus creating different directives for faculty. In the end, the consequences of the actions taken were sometimes surprising and did not always lead to sustainable, continuous, quality improvement for the college, but learning definitely occurred as did an evaluation and improvement process.

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