



Lessons from those who've already been there:
Key elements to implementing student learning
outcomes (poster#213)

Susan Long

Associate Dean, Arts Division

Barbara McNeice-Stallard

Director, Research and Institutional Effectiveness

Mt. San Antonio College, Walnut, California

AIR San Diego May, 2005

ABSTRACT

Accountability in the form of documenting student learning has become a necessity for institutions of higher education. In fact, with the initiation of newly structured accreditation standards for WASC (Western Association of Schools and Colleges) in Fall 2004, assessing student learning is now a requirement for all community colleges in the nation seeking reaccreditation. This mandate poses significant change for community colleges that have not begun this process.

This study examined a non-California community college recognized by experts in the field of assessment as having successfully institutionalized SLOs. Qualitative survey data from 18 faculty and 7 administrators were examined to determine what elements were identified as key to the success of the implementation process. Twelve categories emerged from the data as follows: leadership, support, involvement, commitment, resources, process-based/planning, risk-free philosophy, communication, feedback, staff development, rewards, and recognition. Data from each category was further analyzed to elicit elements that were key to each group. Further, similarities and differences among the groups were examined. In general, faculty were most focused on what impacts their existence in the classroom. Leaders who are important to faculty are deans, middle managers, and faculty themselves; communication is important across course-level assessment projects and in terms of creating a risk-free environment; and faculty sees improvement of teaching and learning as the force behind their commitment. In contrast, administrators tended to take a broad institutional view in describing what was key. Leadership came from the very top, as well as from influential faculty; communication across the institution was important; and, implications for assessment included accountability measures for external stakeholders. Findings from this study demonstrate the importance of understanding these two perspectives as distinct, but essential to successful implementation.

It was also clear from this study that in instituting change of this magnitude the degree to which people impacted felt they had influence over these changes was an essential consideration in planning and implementing SLOs. In fact, the technical and social aspects of implementing outcomes based assessment are inseparable. Lastly, the issues that come forward during implementation are not predictable; therefore, it is important to have a mechanism in place for addressing challenges as they surface.



PURPOSE

OVERVIEW

- Take an in depth look at the key elements that led to successful implementation of SLOs at a community college.
- Examine the key elements from two perspectives: Faculty & Administrative.
- Provide important benchmark data for Community Colleges beginning the process of implementing SLOs.

LITERATURE REVIEW

- Accountability of higher education and the assessment movement
 - Public distrust of higher education due to the inability to document learning of college graduates
 - Legislators and other public officials accountable to public funds
 - Eroding confidence in accrediting bodies to certify quality of education
 - Accreditation standards reflect SLOs



METHODOLOGY

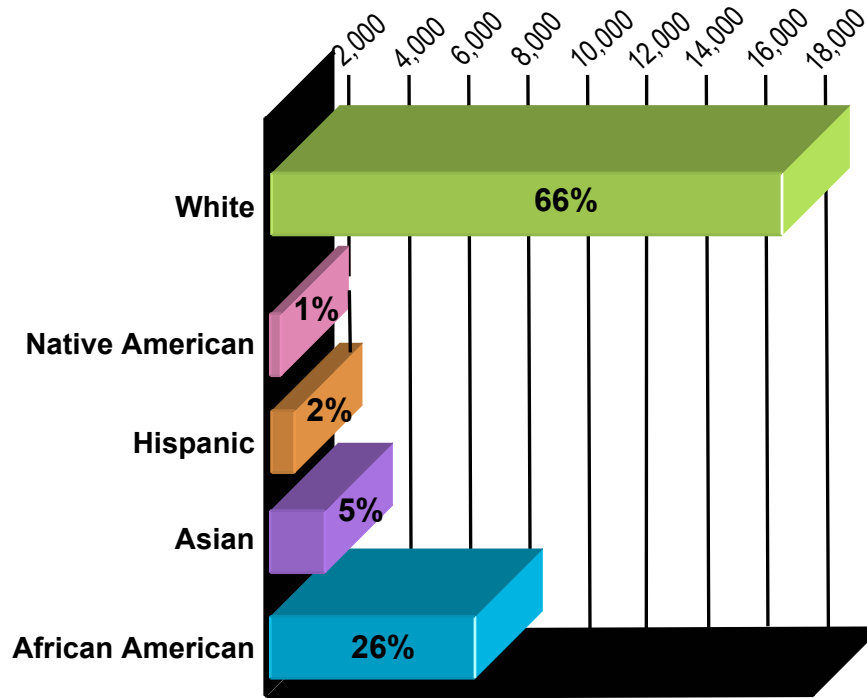
SELECTION OF RESEARCH SITE

- Use of SLO experts in the field to decide research site
- College chosen must Fit with ***definition of institutionalization as noted in the literature by demonstrating:***
 - College mission reflects a commitment to assessment
 - College has a plan or written document regarding the assessment process
 - Faculty, staff, and administrators exhibit an awareness of assessment process
 - Data have been collected at the course, program, and institutional levels
 - Data have been analyzed and used for improvement
 - Results are reflected in college-wide decision making and planning
- Selection of Participants at the research site was made by the on-site coordinator
- Participants were full-time faculty and administrators who have participated in the implementation of SLOs and were identified by on-site coordinator

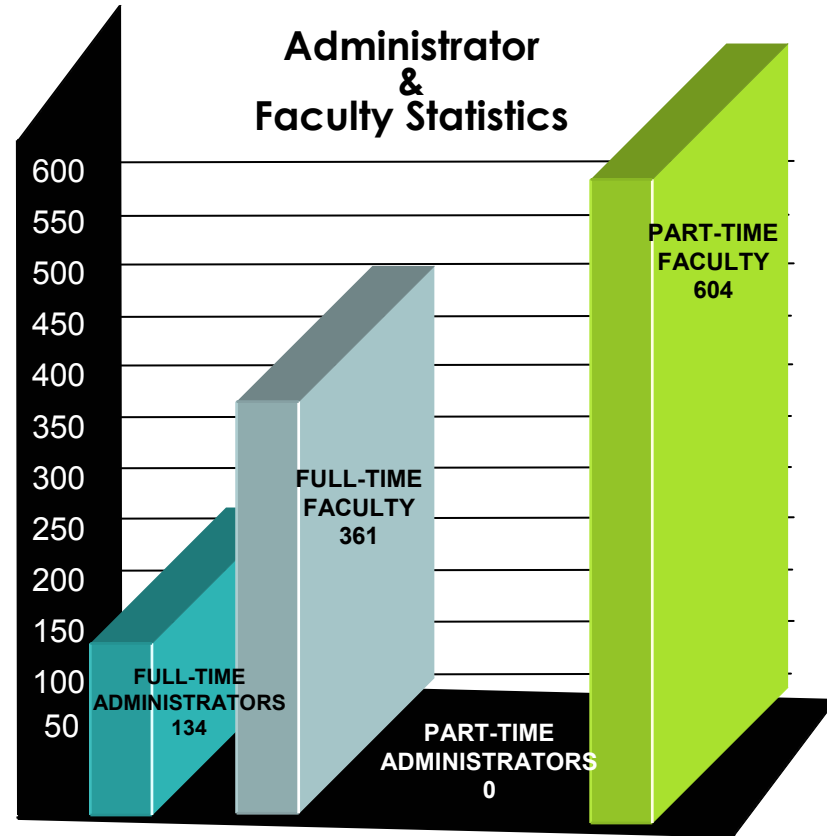
METHODOLOGY

Research Site

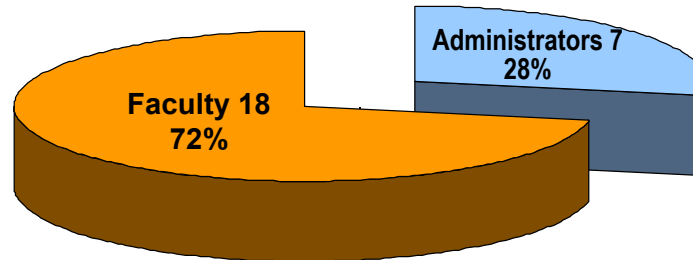
Student Demographics



Administrator & Faculty Statistics



Study Participants



DATA COLLECTION



PHASE 1: QUALITATIVE WEB-BASED SURVEY

- Demographic data: gender, work unit, number of years at college, primary role in implementation
- Written responses to open-ended questions
 1. *What key elements do you believe led to the successful implementation of student learning outcomes on your campus?*
 2. *How was commitment to measuring student learning outcomes encouraged within **your** constituent group?*
 3. *What groups on or off-campus or individuals were instrumental in encouraging the commitment?*
 4. *What barriers were encountered during the implementation process for assessing student learning outcomes at the program/department and institutional levels?*
 5. *What advice do you have for faculty and/or administrators in community colleges beginning to implement a process for assessing student learning outcomes?*



PHASE 2: PHONE FOLLOW-UP

- Response clarification
- Expanded explanation

Summary Table of Key Elements Identified by Faculty, Administrators, or Both

CATEGORY	FACTOR	KEY ELEMENTS		
		FAC.	ADMIN	BOTH
Leadership	Influence from top leaders		X	
	Deans & middle managers	X		
	Faculty as key institutional leaders	X	X	X
	Broad-based leadership		X	
Support	Across the institution		X	
	From administration	X	X	X
	From faculty leaders	X		
Involvement	Broad-based participation College-wide	X	X	X
	Mandatory participation	X	X	X
	Broad-based participation from faculty	X	X	X
Commitment	Broad-based commitment		X	
	Commitment from administrators	X	X	X
	Commitment from faculty	X	X	X
	Mandatory participation	X		
	From external sources		X	
	Improvement of teaching & learning	X		
Resources	Human	X	X	X
	Materials	X		
Process-based/Planning	Institutional Planning	X	X	X
	Well defined SLO plan	X	X	X
	Research design	X	X	X
	Implementation	X	X	X
Risk-free philosophy	No negative consequences for results	X	X	X
Communication	Across the system as a whole	X	X	X
	Within SLO project group	X	X	X
Feedback	Project-based feedback	X		
Staff development	Faculty training sessions	X		
	Project meetings with institutional SLO leaders		X	
Rewards Recognition	Stipends issued for participants	X	X	X
	From Administrators	X		

RESULTS

LEADERSHIP

In this study, participants mentioned the importance of leadership to the process for implementing SLOs. However, from the perspectives of administrators and faculty, leadership that was most influential in success came from very different places. Only administrators cite influence from top leaders as being important to the success of the process. However, administrators also mentioned the importance of faculty as leaders. Faculty, on the other hand, included top leaders, but spoke of their importance in terms of support, not leadership. For faculty, leadership came from middle managers and deans and from their peers, those that provide daily leadership for faculty.

Faculty Quotes

“Administrators felt that faculty knew best, and they gave them the freedom to design the project the way they saw fit.”

“It is important for faculty to hear from their Deans that SLOs are important.”

Administrator Quotes

“It is critical for top leaders within the institution to visibly support SLOs. This leadership should include providing appropriate resources and a risk-free environment.

“Because of classroom experience and direct contact with students, faculty are most credible in leadership positions.”

RESOURCES

Both faculty and administrators identified having more support from institutional research as critical. When this resource was inadequate, projects were held up, and feedback was slow to come. This disadvantaged projects to the extent that faculty listed lack of research support as a barrier to success. Additionally, faculty identified materials such as software, pre and post tests, portfolios, rubrics, and standardized testing instructions, all elements that affect success at the classroom level, as key to success.

Faculty Quotes

“Institutional research office is understaffed and data takes a long time to get analyzed.”

“Data were not received until after the following semester which made it difficult to make modification.”

Administrator Quotes

“We have used a tremendous amount of time from the institutional research office.”

COMMUNICATION

Communication is essential. However, if the environment is not conducive to communicating freely, no amount of information will address the communication gaps that result. Thus, in this study, communication was less about the act of gathering and conveying information and more about the process and approach of identifying and addressing issues via ongoing dialog. Had the commitment to a risk-free environment not been made, it is likely that no amount of information would have bridged the communication gap.

Faculty Quotes

“Communicate what has to be done, how the process will be reviewed, and what the results will be used for.”

“We had formal organizational meetings.”

Administrator Quotes

“When addressing the entire college community, top administrators spoke to the importance of SLOs and the positive impact they have on student learning.”

“Communicate the purpose of SLOs so that it is not interpreted as judging the way faculty teach.”

COMMITMENT

Faculty and administrators alike noted the importance of having commitment from both groups as they bear the brunt of the responsibility in the implementation process. It is important to have faculty committed to the process for implementing SLOs due to their close connection to teaching and learning. While some faculty took issue with the fact that participation was mandated and resisted the process, others found having control over their various projects, working in a risk-free environment, and anticipating the possibility of improving teaching and learning served as motivators for commitment. When administrator respondents spoke of *commitment from administrators*, their comments reflected a focus on top leaders and an awareness of their responsibility for satisfying external mandates and demonstrating accountability through new accreditation standards.

Faculty Quotes

“I decided to get involved as a way to serve my department and gain insight into what our students are learning.”

“We were told we had to do this. What made a difference, however, is faculty had total control over the design and implementation of the project.”

Administrative Quotes

“Major commitment from top leadership, specifically the Chancellor and Vice Chancellor.”

“Our accrediting agency requires a student learning outcomes assessment plan as a part of the accreditation process—it’s a new standard.”

RECOGNITION

In this category only faculty offered enough data to warrant a key element—recognition from administrators. Faculty identified an annual recognition gathering hosted by the Vice Chancellor and recognition from Deans for their work on SLO projects as significant.

Faculty Quotes

“In the cases where administrators recognized the work done by faculty members it was appreciated by faculty.”

“The Vice Chancellor had recognition gatherings for faculty and staff working on projects.”

“Deans openly recognized people for the work they had done.”

FINDINGS



Perhaps one of the most important findings in this study is that there are differences in what faculty and administrators consider to be **key elements** in a successful implementation process.



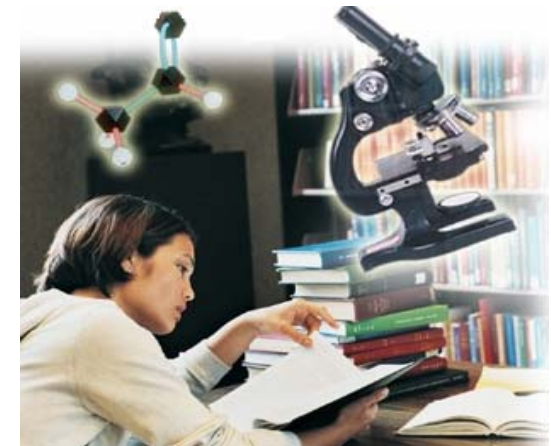
Administrators tend to look more broadly across the institution in describing what is key to a successful implementation process when compared to faculty members' perspectives

- ◆ Leadership from those with broadest influence, top leaders and influential faculty
- ◆ Support from college-wide Advisory Board
- ◆ Communication across the institution
- ◆ Satisfy external mandates



Faculty are most concerned with what goes on in their day-to-day existence in the classroom.

- ◆ Leadership from deans, middle managers, and faculty themselves
- ◆ Communication across course-level assessment projects, in understanding the overall purpose for assessing SLOs, and in creating a risk-free environment
- ◆ Timely feedback from the assessment process
- ◆ Resources in the form of testing materials
- ◆ Improvement of teaching is the driving force behind commitment
- ◆ Power of recognition for faculty



CONCLUSION

What makes these processes effective in the development of an implementation plan is “how” leaders go about engaging **the College** in this process.

“There are people who resist change not just because it’s change, but because it makes them feel uncomfortable. They don’t understand; they don’t feel like they have the skills to do what’s asked of them and they don’t know how. So, what we did for those people was to say we know that; we completely understand and so what we’re going to do is we’re going to be partners with you to help you through all of this and we’re going to be your support. ”

Administrator

“The fact that faculty were given control and our administrative liaisons were supporters rather than enforcers made the difference in commitment.”

Faculty

For communication to be effective it must address constituent questions and concerns:

- Is my involvement key to success that I care about?
- Am I safe in participating?
- Do I receive the information I need in order to be successful?
- Do I get to share what I know in order to support others’ success?

“The process must be non-punitive, and this must be effectively communicated.”

Faculty

“Use of results must focus on improvement of the teaching and learning process, not used as evaluation”

Faculty

“Communicate the purpose of SLOs so that it is not interpreted as judging the way faculty teach.”

Administrator

◆◆◆ Issues and challenges will not be predictable—they are site specific and related to previous experiences of change.



RECOMMENDATIONS

- ◆◆◆ Get deans, middle managers and department chairs involved early in the process.
- ◆◆◆ Become a student of change management.
- ◆◆◆ Include faculty in key leadership positions.
- ◆◆◆ Have a good plan of “what” is to be done, but remember “how” it is done is critical.
- ◆◆◆ Have sufficient support from institutional research staff.
- ◆◆◆ Recognition is important to faculty.

