

NATIONAL OUTCOMES ASSESSMENT PROJECT

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Background

For the past 10 years, Mt. San Antonio College (Mt. SAC) has been engaged in the practice of developing and using assessment of learning outcomes. The college continuously evaluates the effectiveness of its structures and processes in efforts to strengthen this practice. As part this evaluation process, there appeared to be a need for a broader perspective to see how other institutions with stellar reputations have engaged in the practice of using learning outcomes. Thus, the Mt. SAC Research and Institutional Effectiveness department proposed this National Outcomes Assessment Project and spearheaded it with the assistance of both the Outcomes Coordinator and the External Outcomes Consultant. This final report represents the researcher's analytical interpretation of information gathered from the websites of eight institutions with a long history of and sustained practices for effective use of learning outcomes. Caution should be taken in assuming the accuracy of every detail for each college as minimal efforts were taken to cross validate the information posted on websites. It is possible that some websites were outdated and/or that information has changed since the completion of this report. Despite these limitations, this report provides some valuable information regarding what these eight institutions with a respectable reputation systematically do with regard to learning outcomes. It is presented to Mt. SAC for consideration and to the Outcomes Coordinator and Outcomes Committee for review.

Purpose

The Mt. SAC National Outcomes Assessment Project was designed to research the successes of some notable institutions with regard to their Student Learning Outcomes (SLO) assessment processes. Specifically, the goal was to investigate what eight postsecondary institutions have been doing to foster a culture that accepts and uses SLOs for course, program, and institutional improvement. These data were to inform how these colleges might be implementing the sustainable continuous quality improvement level of the rubric used by the Accrediting Commission for Community and Junior Colleges (ACCJC) for evaluating institutional effectiveness.

Methods

The eight institutions selected to be researched based on their reputable work in outcomes assessment were Alverno College, Bakersfield College, Community College of Baltimore County, Cabrillo College, Indiana University-Purdue University Indianapolis, Santa Barbara City College, Sinclair Community College, and Valencia College. With the exception of Alverno College, all the data collected came directly from each college's publically accessible website. Any information listed regarding SLOs and assessment, whether listed under a committee or institutional research unit, was accessed and studied. Given limited public information available online regarding Alverno College's outcomes assessment structure and process due to its natural integration in the institution's culture, one book, *Student Assessment-as-Learning at Alverno College* (1994) by the Alverno College Faculty, was used instead to gather data.

Findings

The data highlighted several common themes with regard to the colleges' outcomes assessment processes. These themes pertained to the:

- understanding of outcomes assessment
- presence of continuous outcomes assessment activities,
- strong professional development structure offering a variety of outcomes assessment support
- organizational structure allowing outcomes assessment issues to be addressed in organized and systematic manner

- communication of outcomes assessment use for the purposes of institutional improvement

While not every college addressed all of the themes, similar actions were nevertheless evident in two or more institutions.

Defining outcomes assessment seems to be an important factor at all institutions. While all eight colleges include language defining their respective outcomes assessment philosophy, four of them also emphasize that results of the assessment process are not associated with the evaluation of personnel. Philosophies and definitions call attention to a continuous cycle of improvement embedded in a systematic approach used to investigate what and how students learn, as well as the effectiveness of the institution in achieving student learning success. Thus, the purpose of describing outcomes assessment appears to go beyond simply raising awareness and, instead, is on educating the public about the core value and purpose behind it.

The presence of continuous outcomes assessment activities appear to be two-fold: first, to raise awareness and promote outcomes assessment; and, secondly, to educate faculty, staff, and, in the case of Bakersfield College, students. A blog [Bakersfield College], an Assessment Community within the faculty's intranet system [Community College of Baltimore County], and a newsletter [Sinclair Community College] help their respective assessment committees keep individuals aware of, and updated on, the important and relevant issues concerning outcomes assessment. The blog makes meeting agendas and minutes available to the general public and, thus, serves as a place to promote outcomes assessment activities. At Sinclair Community College, every year the Academic Assembly Day at the beginning of the academic year brings together faculty and staff to focus on the institution's learning-centered mission. Bakersfield College also holds the Assessment Extravaganza Reception and an Assessment Month, both of which are branded and heavily promoted beforehand. Both activities take place on an annual basis and incorporate fun exercises, such as a scavenger hunt or on the spot SLO quizzes for students and demonstration of exemplary assessment work for faculty and staff, which culminate with pizza for students and gift cards for faculty and staff. The following are great examples of activities that acknowledge and celebrate exemplary assessment work by staff, faculty, managers, and administrators:

- Bakersfield College's Assessment Extravaganza Reception
- Assessment Appreciation Day at Community College of Baltimore County
- Assessment Awards at Sinclair Community College

These annual student assessment activities also serve as a continuous form of education for the community. Assessment Month, for example, takes place in late winter/early spring and offers a variety of student assessment workshops throughout several weeks for faculty and staff, as well as a couple of sessions for students. Sinclair Community College holds a General Education Day every year to discuss the general education curriculum and related outcomes assessment methods. At Valencia College, the National Assessment Conference is held annually to gather faculty and staff from institutions throughout the country who are interested in sharing or learning information about SLO and assessment. Internally at Valencia College, Assessment Day is an annual event in which faculty get together and assess student work and discuss ways to improve the assessment process or student learning. By taking place continuously year after year, these activities seem to help foster a culture that respects and values outcomes assessment.

The degree of outcomes assessment training varies by college. In a few cases, outcomes assessment appears to have been successfully embedded in institutions' professional development efforts. Three colleges have in print educators' competencies that include outcomes assessment knowledge and use. The Community College of Baltimore County has a New Faculty Learning

Community that supports newly hired faculty by offering them a one-year set of workshops that highlight the institution's priorities. Of the institutions studied, Valencia College appears to have the most sophisticated professional development program. It makes courses in a variety of areas available during the academic year as well as in the summer. The most recent faculty development catalog included 15 courses under assessment and six under outcomes-based practice, in addition to courses in other areas. Faculty are compensated for going beyond a set criteria of minimum hours (\$750 for 25 hours and \$1500 for 50 hours). Compensation for participation in workshops is also granted in the form of Flex credit at two other institutions.

Some institutions treat outcomes assessment training in isolation. For example, grants serve as an incentive at three institutions to encourage faculty to engage in outcomes assessment research and to contribute to their colleagues' knowledge by publishing their results. In the past, Cabrillo College and Sinclair Community College made available intense outcomes assessment workshops in the summers. At Cabrillo College, this resulted in 72 faculty members in key leadership positions to become well-versed in the outcomes assessment process. There is also ample evidence of the important role played by the software program used to enter, track, and assess learning outcomes. Plenty of opportunities for training are made available, as are written instructions. In general, there appears to be organization to professional development programs, enticements to make workshops/courses appealing, and accountability measures to hold faculty responsible for their participation.

Some of the institutions' organizational structures provide an alignment that seems to facilitate the outcomes assessment process. First, all institutions have an assessment committee, board, or council overseeing learning outcomes and an institutional research unit, that in some cases, provides support and facilitates its work. Secondly, subcommittees appear to provide additional support. For example, at Bakersfield College, the Curriculum SLO Subcommittee comprised of members on both the Assessment and Curriculum committees has the sole purpose of reviewing course SLOs. The Course Assessments Subcommittee is comprised of members from the Assessment Committee who were trained specifically for the purposes of reviewing course assessments on CurricUNET, the software program housing learning outcomes. A general education review committee or board exists at Community College of Baltimore County and Sinclair Community College and is responsible for reviewing the assessment of the general education learning outcomes. Overall, sharing the responsibility of outcomes assessment among various bodies and/or dividing it within an internal body may help streamline the process and allow for closer scrutiny of learning outcomes.

Lastly, another important organizational structure is the alignment of course, general education, program, and institution learning outcomes. Colleges with a clear alignment appear to be more efficient in their assessment process as they capture multiple learning outcomes with the assessment of each course SLO. Furthermore, this alignment makes it easier for faculty and staff to visualize the whole assessment process and to understand its relevancy. The structure of the alignment also allows for a set cycle or timeline. Having the alignment and the set timeline, thus, make it easier to assess institutional outcomes and use the results. For example, Think Tank sessions are borne out of salient issues identified by assessment committees after reviewing outcomes assessment reports. The Think Tanks serve as evidence that assessments were in fact reviewed and used in efforts to improve the institution. In order for this use to take place, however, the assessment committees need to receive all outcomes assessment reports in a timely manner in the aligned format to be able to efficiently identify the most critical institutional priorities.

Recommendations*

The following recommendations, based on the data collected and analyzed, are suggestions to help strengthen an institution's outcomes assessment process.

Outcomes Assessment Engagement

- Establish a public forum, a blog or newsletter, to help personnel (managers, faculty, and staff) be aware of ongoing learning outcomes issues on campus. Allow faculty and staff to post questions or share successes.
- Establish fun activities and promote them well. These activities can serve the purpose of educating individuals or simply reminding them of the value and importance of outcomes assessment. The point is to do these activities on a regular basis so that outcomes assessment becomes embedded in the institution's culture.
- Provide evidence of how outcomes assessment has improved courses, programs, and the institution. Sharing how results from outcomes assessments are being used may encourage others to engage in the process.
- Make forms/templates (e.g. assessment plans, assessment reports, mapping grids), rubrics, stellar examples, guidebooks, and assessment information easily accessible and user friendly.

Outcomes Assessment Knowledge

- Personnel should have a clear understanding of the purpose or philosophy behind the assessment of student learning outcomes. They should know what outcomes assessment is and what it is not. They should also understand the process of how learning outcomes are used to improve courses, programs, and the institution.
- Provide an organized, well-structured professional development program that integrates outcomes assessment learning opportunities during the summer and throughout the academic year. A well-coordinated professional development program helps keep personnel accountable for meeting a certain minimum hours of training and makes it easier to compensate those who go beyond. Coordinate the compensation of personnel for innovative research projects that can contribute to the advancement of the outcomes assessment process. Make courses and workshops as practical as possible so that personnel can recognize and appreciate the intrinsic value of the assessment process. Recognition and appreciation is likely to lead to continuous engagement and, thus, make the process sustainable.
- Provide advanced training in outcomes assessment for personnel in leadership positions. Knowledgeable leaders are more likely to provide good direction for those they supervise or guide. Similarly, provide training aligned with job expectations that include outcomes assessment responsibilities for newly hired personnel.
- Allow faculty to explore challenges to learning outcomes and assessment by providing access to grants that fund research outcomes assessment projects. Sharing findings of such studies with colleagues may help others further engage in the process.

* These recommendations, written without consulting Mt. SAC personnel, are the opinions of the author and are presented here solely for information purposes. In no way do these recommendations reflect the opinions of, or endorsement by, Mt. SAC personnel.

- Acknowledge and reward personnel for their outcomes assessment successes. Doing so raises awareness of outcomes assessment and its importance to the institution's priorities and values.

Outcomes Assessment Organizational Structure

- Learning outcomes assessment issues should not be restricted to one committee or department. Conversations or discussions regarding learning outcomes should also take place in committees or formal groups that address (new) courses, (new) programs, general education courses, program reviews, faculty duties, and professional development.
- Create task groups to help streamline the work of the assessment committee.
- Align course, general education, and institutional learning outcomes to streamline the assessment process.
- Establish a continuous cycle/timeline of planning, assessment, and implementation of changes so that it is evident that improvement is a never ending, continuous process.

Institutions with a dynamic outcomes assessment process appear to have a productive organizational structure that invites both interest in learning about it and engagement in it. This leads to participation in a process that naturally becomes continuous and sustainable. It appears that it is then that the outcomes assessment process becomes embedded in an institution's culture.