Since Josh and I wrote our article last spring on Student Learning Outcomes, we’ve had the pleasure of hearing from colleagues who said the article sparked conversation. This is excellent! We could ask for no more satisfying response. In addition, we have had questions and requests for clarification. This article is meant to address those and also to reflect on current trends.

One question we’ve been asked is, "where did Student Learning Outcomes come from?" By Student Learning Outcome, of course, we mean the new requirement to track and report simple success markers outside divisions, not the healthy awareness of classroom performance in which most faculty have long been engaged. The drive for simple metrics of accountability in higher education did not originate with ACCJC or WASC, though those bodies are being used to enforce the practice; SLO’s were created as a result of federal pressures that, at least in part, are the result of long-standing lobbying efforts by those who have a personal vision for how to manage higher education. The drive for simple metrics of accountability in higher education did not originate with ACCJC or WASC, though those bodies are being used to enforce the practice; SLO’s were created as a result of federal pressures that, at least in part, are the result of long-standing lobbying efforts by those who have a personal vision for how to manage higher education.

The term Student Learning Outcome was the product of the Federal Commission on the Future of Higher Education, also known as the Spellings Commission. Margaret Spellings, who chaired this committee, was President Bush’s Secretary of Education from 2005 to 2009, and she was and is a vocal proponent of No Child Left Behind (NCLB). She has also been explicit in her view that NCLB forms of accountability should be brought into public higher education to provide accountability for professors and institutions. Hence, SLO’s were created to function as a reportable metric.

An excellent account of at least some of the attitudes which informed the Commission’s work can be found in a recent interview Time Magazine conducted with President Bush on No Child Left Behind which can be found here: http://ideas.time.com/2012/01/12/lets-not-weaken-it-an-exclusive-interview-with-george-w-bush-on-nclb/. I recommend anyone interested in NCLB and SLO’s read it. The President is quite clear: Spellings believed we could not evaluate the success of our educators without absolute and statistical measurements. President Bush has never been one to hold back, and in this remarkable article the President defends the need for this kind of accountability by declaring, “People don’t like to be accountable.” By this he means teachers and professors. He assumes that teachers would prefer to work without oversight or assessment, that we are not really interested in improving our performance, and this is how he interprets the complex and often intelligent resistance to NCLB (and SLO’s), responses which he reductively labels “union issues.”

Having never taught at the K-12 level, I cannot begin to address the success or failure of NCLB. I will say that I admire NCLB’s goal to improve educational outcomes for underrepresented groups, even if some of my friends who do teach at that level question its success in achieving that goal and are critical of NCLB as a whole. But community college faculty should make no mistake: there is a very real possibility that the way that SLO’s are and will be understood by many state and federal Legislators, by those who [continued on next page]
fund us, is one channel to provide external, statisti-
cal accountability for professors and campuses; at
the very least, SLO data could well be read this way
by inspection teams and many administrators. At
this time Student Learning Outcomes (as far as I
know) are not leaving my campus; they are not be-
ing used to evaluate individual instructors or programs;
in fact, they are not being used for much of anything
besides (in some cases) helpful local reflection within
departments. Yet, we are still required to track and
report them, and WASC/ACCJC continue to raise the
bar as to how much information we provide and how
widely we collect it. The pressure to produce more
detailed outcome data from nearly every course
we teach is likely to continue. All this comes to me
as someone who has taught in the community college
for nearly two decades. I find the entire “accountabil-
ity” movement a bit cynical and certainly uninform.
Cynical in terms of who teachers actually are and what
we do, and with a healthy dose of reality-checking
rhetoric from voices as diverse as President Bush and
Margaret Spellings to Nancy Shulock and Chancellor
Jack Scott, for an outside (and voting) observer to
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The real dialogue over student success should begin,
with the only response that has the potential to produce
real change. We are by nature and training commu-
nity college faculty, who make decisions which affect us.
I am not willing to say, as I know, not at the CSU or UC) because they alleg-
edly lack vocational merit. And intriguingly enough,
taken out of the context of the California system, they
are a political movement...SLO’s are not pedagogical;
SLO’s are a political movement..." This is not to say that examining statistical informa-
tion as well as transfer and retention data or the percent-
age of transfers and degree completions is without
merit. We should be aware of such numbers. But this
approach can quickly become misleading and toxic
when such information is removed from its holistic,
real-world campus context, and worse, when it is
removed from the challenges in the lives of our stu-
dents. Consider for a moment a group I mentioned
earlier, the Student Success Task Force, a commit-
tee of twenty persons, and their attempt to reshape
our community college system in order to improve
student success in California. One of their multiple
recommendations is that “Report Cards” be placed
online for each college community. They would like
to see transfer and degree completion rates, along
with other statistics that they feel depict success for
each institution, posted on the Internet. I am not sure
what good use the public can make of such numbers;
but as an experienced faculty member, I know
that these kinds of information are useful. Hence,
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Senate from outside Los Rios said to me, that the SLO “battle” is over, that we can expect our faculty to go through “stages of grief” as they are forced to begin reporting SLO’s. I would rather use a quote from my friend at FACCC, Jonathan Lightman, who said, reflecting on the entire advocacy process, “Politics is never over.”

BUDGET WOES AND THE BATTLE OF THE INITIATIVES
By Dean Murakami

While the discussions about further section cuts have begun again in Los Rios, this is all in response to the serious budget difficulties we are facing. As noted in Chancellor Harris’s email, the community colleges are facing an additional $149 million deficit for the current budget year of 2011-12. This is above the anticipated budget trigger $30 million in cuts. While the State Chancellor’s office warned the legislature about a potential $25 million student fee shortfall last year, that has now turned into a $107 million shortfall. Add in a $41 million property tax shortfall, plus additional shortages and you have this incredible midyear cut with less than four months left in the budget year! We are hoping that the legislature will help backfill at least a portion of the property tax and student fee shortfalls. We would not be in this mess if the community college system did not tie student fees directly to our funding which was vigorously fought by faculty groups. But, this is why we need your help in lobbying the legislature so that we can minimize the cuts we will have to make in classes. It has such a detrimental effect on our students and part-time faculty.

The Governor’s proposed budget in January for 2012-13 does not get much better. The Governor actually has proposed to increase community college funding by $218 million, but that has been allocated to buy down the deferrals. While buying down $218 million of the current $961 million in deferrals is important, however, this means that none of the money can be used to prevent class sections cuts, save a part-timer’s job, provide additional counseling, offset our healthcare increases, or help in our categorical programs. He has also proposed to block grant all categorical programs and will reduce the number of Cal Grant recipients by 50%.

All of this was predicated on the passage of his original Tax Initiative. If the Governor’s Initiative fails then that will trigger a $2.4 billion cut to Prop 98, which translates into a $264 million reduction to community colleges leading to a 5.56% workload reduction. This means a $12.2 million cut to Los Rios and a $6.2 million cut to the Faculty Bucket. The February estimate by the Legislative Analyst’s Office (LAO) of the triggered Prop 98 cut to community colleges has gone from $264 million to $292 million. The numbers keep getting worse. The LAO predicts a $6.5 billion greater deficit than originally forecast in the Governor’s budget. This is more than what the Governor’s Tax Initiative is expected receive in revenues of $4.8 billion. So, the Governor will have to make significant cuts to his original budget proposal.

There were three competing tax initiatives that are gathering signatures right now, the Governor’s, Molly Munger’s and the California Federation of Teachers (CFT) Millionaires Tax, all of which are trying to minimize the cuts to public education and