



UNION NEWS

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SLO DOWN

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It is always dangerous to predict the future; in fact, it cannot be done. Nevertheless, while some of our colleagues have found Student Learning Outcomes a valuable pedagogical tool, and while we applaud that fact, we would like to address some concerns we have with SLO's, discuss how we got here and where we might be headed. This does not mean that faculty who find SLO's helpful for shaping their course content or assessing their students are doing something wrong; there is a clear difference between using SLO's for personal or departmental reflections on pedagogy and having that data used in other ways. We also realize our perception of SLO's is idiosyncratic, and we are open to hearing from colleagues with differing perspectives.

We start by highlighting an obvious fact: providing college education is expensive. The long term cost of limiting access is demonstrably greater still, and many Californians seem to know this. This remains true even if some Californians continue to hold the oddly dissonant position that while education is good, an adequate tax structure to pay for education is bad. Also, in times like these, when every State expense is under scrutiny, there is naturally more pressure to understand or regulate what community colleges do. We believe that one possible outgrowth of all these factors, as they exist at the state and national level, is pressure from WASC/ACCJC to apply certain



models of accountability to college professors, to monitor us as though we work the widget line.

We will say at the outset that we genuinely understand the desire those who fund us have to be certain that we are doing our jobs; this is far from unreasonable. No one contests that community colleges cost money, and that hundreds of thousands of Californians attend our campuses and depend on our work. However, we have grave doubts that insisting all faculty track and report SLO's is a legitimate answer. We have spoken with colleagues who feel the same way, but it is not enough to preach to the choir; community college educators must respond strategically; we must work to inform those who regulate our funding and ultimately control all that we do. We need to let the Legislature, and the voting public, know that there is already considerable accountability in place in the community college system and that faculty regularly track

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student success. Perhaps above all, faculty need to watch carefully and remain aware.

Accountability is nothing new. The fact is that before SLO's we had legally binding course objectives in the course outlines, and we had units of instruction in the same documents. We have been required to focus our teaching around those goals for a very long time. For many of us who are now full-time, we got into the tenure track after several years of teaching adjunct, being evaluated as teachers in graduate school and as part-timers when a bad review could have ended our incipient careers. And once in the tenure track, we were closely evaluated every fall by peers and administrators. After tenure, we had student evaluations and a self study every three years and continued class visits. How does this not reflect a clear accountability, at least as demanding as many other professions which might pay us more for our education, communication skill and expertise?

Also important is the fact that the hard won processes we use for instructor assessment, the result of collegial collective bargaining,

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could be completely disregarded if SLO's are ever used for evaluation. As we understand it, faculty have no real control who will see, use, or even understand the SLO data, any more than we have power over WASC/ACCJC's insistence that we begin tracking and reporting. And worse, we have no guarantee such data will be used formatively; meaning, weaknesses identified in my evaluations can and should be strengthened through mentoring by peer faculty, but with SLO's we have no promise of such support.

Several faculty we've spoken with have agreed with us on a somewhat obvious point: instructors already track Student Learning Outcomes; this process is called grading. As English instructors, we spend hours most weeks doing it, some weeks, many hours. The same set of criteria for a Freshman paper that we would put into SLO's we assess every time we score an essay whether we use an explicit rubric or not. We are well aware when a class or student is struggling with the thesis statement, or paragraph unity, or correct use of citations. Those skills are presented in class then assessed in each essay; the final result is presented to the student in a holistic grade, a system which allows us to track large scale trends and see student success on multiple levels first hand. Other disciplines can surely state the same within their own contexts. It feels uncomfortably odd to suggest that we must be required to track and report my SLO's in order to insure that we are reflective and successful instructors.

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Also, grading allows us to appreciate the intricate strengths which make superior papers stand out. In English, these are things like thesis statements which rise far above adequacy, sophisticated diction, or force of argument. SLO's are not meant to monitor excellence; the students satisfy the basic requirement for a given skill or not. If anyone would like to know how our students are doing in those terms, what percent are meeting basic outcomes, the pass and attrition information is readily available.

Also troubling is the time SLO's will take faculty. The fact is, during the school year, professors work very hard. We prepare, teach, grade, meet with students, do campus service, and work to stay current in our fields. It is not uncommon for many of us to work in the evening or during the weekend. Just when are faculty supposed to track, compile, and report the data SLO's require? Taking the extra step, on top of our grading, to provide a percentage or explanatory paragraph for how many students adequately reflect a set of basic skills,

this is workload creep our profession cannot afford. It will cut into things we do, like making reflective comments on papers, which actually make a difference for our students.

Further, while the state Academic Senate and the local SLO Advisory committees have worked hard to have faculty involved as SLO's are implemented, as many of our friends who teach in K-12 have pointed out, we have no guarantees the community colleges will not ultimately move closer to the current K-12 model. Believing our colleges or departments or faculty members can be evaluated using SLO data is too seductive a fantasy for this model not to expand and deepen, to perhaps some day impact instructor or program evaluation and even funding.

It is reasonable to remember at this point that while the instructor is a highly dynamic piece of the student-success pie, he or she is only one part of the overall equation. Factors such as prior student educational experience, home support, both documented and undocumented learning disabilities, and perhaps most important, student motivation all have a cumulative impact that supersedes the force the instructor has over the student. The fact is that the realities which contribute to student success are broad and the picture diverse. It is only through quality instruction that students can learn, but measuring instructor competence with a statistical evaluation of SLO's is to ignore the many other vital pieces that determine student success.

It seems fair to ask, what began this phenomenon? Why is WASC/ACCJC insisting we begin reporting Learning Outcomes now? Is there evidence that community college faculty are not effective? We have not seen evidence of such incompetence in data or in our experience; in our division we work with committed and driven colleagues. Is WASC/ACCJC's only interest in SLO's greater pedagogical reflection within departments? Or is the final goal for SLO's to monitor faculty to assure that we are not slacking, teaching off topic, unaware or dismissive of our students' performance? Also, considering how much time these will take, were community college faculty shown evidence from other campuses where SLO's had clearly improved student success as we considered them as a potential pedagogical tool? That is not how we believe the phenomenon is unfolding.

What is happening is this: faculty are being told by the WASC/ACCJC to begin tracking and reporting SLO's to Administration, and who knows who else, or risk working on a campus which is no longer an accredited college, a multi million dollar, taxpayer-funded institution which had been stripped of its viability. In short, we are being threatened.

If those who fund us, the Legislature and our fellow Californians, want to improve community college outcomes, the answers are at hand. Fund us completely so that we can provide adequate tutoring, counseling,

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and student support, so that we can hire and mentor more of the best instructors out of our part-time pools, so that we can afford smaller class sizes. Just as critical, address economic class inequality in California. Often, our students miss class or fall behind on homework or don't take the time to get extra help because they must work, or care for their siblings or children, or assist their parents, or lack medical insurance, or all of these things. Many come from homes where they are the first to attend college, and familial and social support is limited.

We must expand college-based programs which reach into disadvantaged communities and increase the size and scope of categorical programs like EOPS and RISE. We must never forget the fact that working members of our students' families, and our student themselves, must find jobs which provide health care and pay a living wage. The more wealth is driven to the top, the more community colleges and the students we serve will suffer.

Frankly, the use of SLO's by WASC/ACCJC, Administration, or any outside body to assess instruction reflects a simplistic, micro-management model which fails to comprehend accountability measures already in place at the community college and the nature of the academic profession. Faculty must do all we can to remain proactive. Improved outcomes will come not with attempting to whip educators into shape when we are already good at what we do, but from adequate funding and increased social equity. It is not a simple answer, but it is the truth.

Make no mistake: we are being lowered into a pot of warm water which may one day boil.

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