



UNION NEWS

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MARCH / APRIL 2012

SLO DOWN 2.0

By Troy Meyer

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. It's worth noting that these pressures have spread beyond the federal level: the California State Legislature and State Chancellor's Office, via the Student Success Task Force, are currently embracing similar language. Whatever Student

Learning Outcomes will be or have become, there can be no doubt that a desire for greater accountability for professors was how SLO's were born.

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 SLO's or NCLB read it. The President is quite clear: Spellings believed we could not evaluate the success of our educators without absolute

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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

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fund us, is one channel to provide external, statistical accountability for professors and campuses; at the very least, SLO data could well be read this way by the accreditation teams and many administrators. At this time Student Learning Outcomes (as far as I know) are not leaving my campus; they are not being 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 continues 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 causes me to remain skeptical that the required implementation of SLO's is merely to impress on us a useful pedagogical tool (and as an important aside, only some faculty have found the new SLO's useful; many of us feel SLO's are simply wasting valuable time and doing nothing to improve our instructional quality). I believe the facts show that it is impossible to separate SLO's from the larger and ideologically charged accountability movement.

As someone who has taught in the community college for nearly two decades, I find the entire "accountability" movement a bit cynical and certainly uninformed. Cynical in terms of who teachers actually are and what we actually do and with whom we do it: in my opinion, this entire phenomenon, from SLO's to the "Report Cards" the California Student Success Task Force is insisting be posted online for each college, misunderstands the dedication of the professionals who teach. The culture of the community college is already a culture of instructional excellence unequalled in California higher education.

Nor do I think the accountability movement, whether it becomes attached to outcomes-based funding or not, is likely to make significant changes in outcomes. But, and this is a critical point: it would be easy, listening to 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 assume that the community colleges have no accountability in place whatsoever; that no useful oversight of individual faculty or college performance is in place; that we pontificate in our regalia from the top floor of the ivory tower in blithe disregard of our students.

This is plainly not the case. It is not that college professors "don't like to be accountable." What we want is to be held accountable in meaningful ways and by people who understand our work. Who better to provide that service than experienced colleagues? Hence, our unions and administrations have negotiated peer review teams consisting of instructional faculty from



our areas of expertise and deans with instructional backgrounds. We have layers of administration committed (at least in Los Rios) to the functional management of our colleges. The Boards of Trustees provide critical oversight. And significantly, we have accreditation teams of experienced faculty and administrators from across geographic areas whose job is to peer intently into what our colleges are up to and how we are performing (something they have long done without agenda-driven edicts from those who work outside higher education). These teams consistently make detailed recommendations and then hold us legally accountable. The fact is that collegial accountability and quality control are an integral part of the community college system. Could these processes be enhanced or improved? Perhaps. That is part of the role of collective bargaining and our ongoing dialogue with accreditation. But the potent, and false, narrative behind the external, statistical accountability movement, and this includes SLO's, is that any person outside education (like a Legislator) can pick up a spreadsheet and see how a college is doing as though campus faculty are making shirts or selling insurance policies.

"SLO's are not a pedagogical movement; they are a political movement ..."

This is not to say that examining statistical information such as pass and retention data or the percentage 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 students. Consider for a moment a group I mentioned earlier, the Student Success Task Force, a commit-

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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 community college. They would like to see transfer and degree completion rates, along with other statistical data they feel define success for each institution, posted on the Internet. I am not sure what good use the public can make of such numbers, but the fact that these spreadsheets are to be called "Report Cards" will make that decision for them. The public and the Legislature understand that term. Our institutions will soon be evaluated by those outside education in terms of our statistical outcomes. The theory, of course, is that if we are held publicly accountable, we will get our academic acts together under the pressure of public scrutiny. As if concern for our students and commitments to our professions were not enough.

What will these "Report Cards" actually cause? Only time can tell. But how will Los Rios appear to the voting public in the next bond initiative if SCC's transfer numbers have not improved year to year to year? Or if we grant slightly fewer degrees than the statewide average? How interested will the average armchair evaluator be in nuance, in the nature of our student population or the levels of the categorical funding we receive from the state?

The foundational issue, then, is not SLO's in isolation; it is the complete philosophical shift in how performance in higher education is to be evaluated, away from a long-standing, traditional academic community model to a simplistic and statistical approach that ignores the complex nature of our culture, an ideological revamp unique in our generation. Am I saying SLO's are all bad? No. As Josh and I said in the last article, we evaluate learning outcomes every time we grade a paper. But I'm also saying that the accountability system we have long had in place, while perhaps not perfect, is by no means broken, and that SLO's are not likely to do much to improve the lives of our students or our faculty. The primary reason many of us see students who are able to do the work drop from a class is because of economic or personal difficulty, a change in job schedule, the loss of a job, difficulty getting adequate health care, the inability to afford a textbook or reliable transportation, and, often, arching over all, lack of support and expectations from family and peers. I don't know this from examining statistics; I know this from talking to students.

The real dialogue over student success should begin, then, not with teachers "who don't like to be accountable," but by taking a hard look at social equity, investing in outreach into the communities where our students struggle most.

The new accountability movement comes, disturbingly but not surprisingly, at the same time as other shifts: challenges to open access, curtailments in financial aid, changes in repeatability that will become even more challenging with the new alignment of the census and drop dates; these new policies will hit our least prepared students the hardest. Also, there is clear language coming out of the Legislature and the State Chancellor's Office and the Student Success Task Force (which is chaired by the State Chancellor) that we limit the historically broad-based mission of the community college; not only has lifelong learning essentially disappeared, but according to the SSTF, students are supposed to declare their career intent their first year and stick to that decision as they move, as quickly as possible, into the work force. For some students, this is exactly correct; for others, it ignores the complex realities of their lives and decision paths. In the push to produce a workforce with the greatest possible utility, humanities courses have already been cut at the community college (but, as far as I know, not at the CSU or UC) because they allegedly lack vocational merit. And intriguingly enough, tucked away in the Student Success Task Force report, is the demand by the SSTF for funds to increase the size of the State Chancellor's Office at a time when our district alone is turning away thousands. Off-campus management is to grow, and their role in assessment is to grow along with it. No wonder they want quickly accessible metrics. But who should be held accountable here for failing to meet the needs of our students? Faculty or the politicians?

The most common, and difficult, question Josh and I have been asked is,

"what should faculty who oppose SLO's do?"

Some have said they refuse to participate in the SLO process at all. We never suggested this in the last article; there are some decisions tenured faculty must make on their own. Actually, the creative ways our colleagues are currently managing the pressures to implement SLO's, to keep instructors involved, has merit (though how long the current degree of control will last is anyone's guess). But that is not the most useful response to the new accountability movement we can offer. The solution lies in another direction.

The best strategy community college educators have is this: we must get our narrative into the public and legislative domain and keep it there! That will take effort, and it will be playing the long game, but it is the only response that has the potential to produce real change. We are by nature and training communicators and educators, and we must educate those who make decisions which affect us. I am not willing to say, as one leader in the statewide Academic

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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.”

SLO’s are not a pedagogical movement; they are a political movement, and the curtain never falls on the political stage. ■

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 30%.

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

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