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Although community colleges have made significant strides in assessing student learning outcomes, there are a number of significant challenges that need to be addressed in order to realize fully the anticipated benefits of these efforts. This chapter identifies these major challenges and provides specific suggestions that can be used by community colleges, state and accrediting agencies, and universities to facilitate the development, implementation, and continued support of student learning outcomes assessment initiatives that will increase student learning and achievement.

Meeting the Challenges of Assessing Student Learning Outcomes

Jack Friedlander, Andreea M. Serban

Why are so many community colleges finding it so difficult to design, develop, implement, and sustain a comprehensive approach to assessing student learning outcomes? Why do community college practitioners need to devote so much time at their individual campuses trying to discover how to approach assessing student learning outcomes? More specifically, why are community colleges each being asked to start from scratch in figuring out how to assess student learning outcomes? Why is there so little evidence that multi-year efforts to assess student learning outcomes affect student learning and development and the achievement of desired institutional outcomes?

This chapter has three purposes: to identify the primary challenges community colleges need to address in developing, implementing, and sustaining a comprehensive approach to assessing student learning outcomes; to offer suggestions for how community college practitioners can respond to each of these challenges; and to advance recommendations for providing colleges with the technical assistance they need to implement and sustain a comprehensive approach to assessing student learning outcomes that will achieve the desired learning, improvement, and accountability outcomes of assessment.

Primary Challenges and Recommendations

Based on our review of the literature, including the chapters contained in this issue and conversations with practitioners and leaders involved in assessing student learning outcomes, we have identified four major challenges that need to be addressed if the desired goals for assessing student

learning outcomes are to be fully achieved. A number of recommendations targeted to specific constituencies are offered to address each of the challenges identified.

First Challenge. There is a lack of evidence that multi-year efforts to assess student learning outcomes affect student learning and development, achievement of desired institutional outcomes, instructional methods, co-curricular programs, and college policies and processes. The observations and conclusions made by several of the authors in this volume offer insights on why full models for assessing student learning outcomes that practitioners could adapt for their own institutions are not available. In Chapter Seven, Milam, Voorhees, and Bedard-Voorhees state, “Regional accreditors describe their expectations for measuring learning outcomes differently. . . . Most standards suggested by the regional accrediting agencies generally encompass what should be required of colleges, but there is little guidance how to measure competencies or units of learning they imply or even what those competencies are. It is ironic that regional accreditors suggest that colleges produce favorable assessment results when the knowledge base that might drive such accreditation decisions, especially the measurement of student learning, has not been fully informed by practice.”

In Chapter One, Banta, Black, Kahn, and Jackson talk about the importance of providing stakeholders with credible evidence on the benefits of assessing student learning outcomes in improving and sustaining assessment. They observe, “Unfortunately, credible evidence of learning and effectiveness can be elusive. . . . To date, however, community colleges and their stakeholders have not resolved what constitutes credible evidence in all areas of their mission.”

In his comprehensive analysis of the status of student learning assessment, Volkwein (2003) noted, “Faculty are most enthusiastic about assessment when they fully understand what assessment is and how they and their students can benefit. When assessment is focused on improving teaching and learning, faculty recognize it as being connected to their interests” (p. 9). However, Volkwein goes on to state that knowledge of the effects of the use of assessment in higher education on student performance, instructional methods, and academic policy remains limited.

In Chapter Four, Bers examines program-level assessment in community colleges (other than those in English composition, mathematics, or from programs other than those in health careers or with certification or license exams). She was not able to find many examples of program-level assessment that are actually being done rather than planned, or assessments that have generated results then used for improving or sustaining program quality. She concluded that program-level assessment at community colleges is still in its infancy.

Although much has been written about the importance of linking the assessment of outcomes to improvement of student learning and development, there has been limited documentation of how the assessment results

have been used to guide instructional methods. Other than examples of classroom assessment techniques used to assess specific aspects of student learning, such as those described in Chapter Three, there is an absence of literature linking various pedagogical techniques to the promotion of the desired student learning outcomes. The assessment processes used by colleges are often silent on the training required in the area of pedagogy, instructional methods, and co-curricular programs that promote student attainment of desired learning outcomes. Similarly, little or no attention has been given to changes in institutional policies and procedures to support the assessment effort (for example, faculty evaluation policies and incentives, adequate support services, linking faculty professional development efforts to support student learning outcomes assessment, program definition, and clarification of student expectations and standards).

Recommendations Directed to Community College Practitioners. Authors in Chapters One, Three, and Eight provide excellent examples of the processes for engaging the campus community in the student learning assessment effort. However, colleges need to go beyond processes to identify how best to measure, analyze, interpret, and report the results of this effort. For each student learning outcome to be achieved, whether at the course, program, or institutional level, there has to be a clear definition of the skill (competency) to be acquired; assessment tool(s) or technique(s) used to measure the attainment of the skill; and measurement, documentation, and reporting of the actual extent to which the skill has been acquired.

An overall framework for reporting the achievement of desired student learning outcomes is needed at the course, program, and institutional levels. The framework should allow institutions to compare changes over time, both at the aggregate and granular levels (for example, entry levels of skills for various groups of students).

Colleges must provide professional development opportunities for faculty and co-curricular staff on effective pedagogical techniques and intervention strategies that support the attainment of specific student learning outcomes. For example, few faculty outside English have received any formal training in teaching reading, writing, or public speaking skills. If a desired outcome is to improve students' communication skills (reading, writing, speaking, listening), then faculty teaching outside of the English and Communications departments need to receive training on effective strategies and instructional methods for developing, assessing, and assisting students with these skills. A similar statement could be made for each of the other desired general education skills and competencies discussed in Chapter Eight (such as computation skills, community skills, critical thinking and problem-solving skills, information management skills, interpersonal skills, personal skills, and technology skills).

Recommendations Directed to State and Accrediting Agencies. State and accrediting agencies should provide guidance regarding the core student learning outcomes that should be achieved by community colleges for each

of their various missions. The guide would allow for colleges to adopt or adapt the student learning outcomes and align them with their particular environments. These guides should also include suggested methods, tools, instruments for assessing each of the desired student learning outcomes and, if possible, normative data to provide baselines for comparisons.

The suggested core student learning outcomes should go beyond traditional institutional output measures such as course completion rates, number of degrees awarded, number of students transferring, and job placement rates mentioned in Chapter Five.

State and accrediting agencies should identify qualified individuals whom colleges could call upon to assist with student learning outcomes assessment. If possible, these individuals should complete certification training to ensure that colleges will receive appropriate guidance and assistance in their assessment efforts.

These recommendations would save each college an enormous amount of time and resources in determining how to define, collect, analyze, and report student learning outcomes. The need for such assistance is obvious: after more than two decades of attempting to assess student learning outcomes, community college practitioners are still unclear on how to conduct a comprehensive program of assessment of student learning outcomes effectively.

Second Challenge. There is a lack of knowledge about assessment processes, tools, and models. Generally, at any given college, few faculty and staff have been formally trained in developing measurable and valid learning outcomes; aligning the curriculum with those outcomes; developing assessment questions, instruments, and methods; and developing and implementing a plan for assessing those outcomes that is manageable, meaningful, and sustainable. In addition, few colleges have an infrastructure in place to provide the technical knowledge and support to assist full- and part-time faculty with the design, collection, analysis, and application of assessment data. Moreover, few institutions have designated staff member(s) with the time, knowledge, and skills to link course, program, and institutional learning outcomes or to disseminate the results of the student learning outcomes efforts.

Throughout this volume, each of the authors points to the lack of knowledge in this area as a major impediment. For example, in Chapter Eight, Miles and Wilson cite the following observation of their external evaluator: “Participants universally identified assessment as the most difficult aspect of this work. . . . Team members from all areas of the colleges admitted that they do not know how to assess.”

Recommendations Directed to Community College Practitioners. Prior to engaging in any institution-wide assessment of student learning outcomes effort, colleges need to develop a comprehensive plan to provide faculty and staff with the competencies they need to conduct assessment. As Serban suggests in Chapter Two, a college could start by identifying individuals on

campus with relevant skills who could provide leadership and ongoing technical support for this effort. Since it is unlikely that any one person would have knowledge in all required areas of assessment (including constructing valid test questions, methods of evaluating writing, critical thinking, and an array of assessment techniques such as embedded course assessment, authentic assessment techniques, performance-based outcomes measures, holistic scoring, and portfolio analysis), a team of faculty and staff with in-house expertise would need to be assembled. If appropriate, one or more consultants may need to be employed to assist this team in developing and enhancing its expertise and in crafting a plan for providing ongoing technical support and training for both full- and part-time instructors at the college. Colleges should start with a subset of courses and conduct a pilot study to evaluate all aspects of the assessment process.

Recommendations Directed to State and Accrediting Agencies. States and accrediting agencies should provide training materials on assessment processes, tools, and models that can be used by faculty and staff at individual colleges. In addition to training materials, states and accrediting agencies should sponsor workshops through a variety of delivery modes to assist colleges in using the training materials developed and to disseminate best practices.

Third Challenge. It is difficult to gain consensus among faculty in what they are trying to achieve at the course, program, and college levels. Generally, course outlines include a list of objectives and methods of measuring those objectives. However, these objectives are not necessarily student learning outcomes and are not stated in measurable terms. Also these objectives are typically stated broadly, without specificity in terms of particular skills or competencies that students should acquire. In most community colleges, faculty have not had a tradition of working together at the department level to develop student learning outcomes at a granular level and methods for assessing those outcomes. More specifically, most faculty have not had the training or experience in identifying student learning outcomes and how they should be assessed, or in determining the level of ability or knowledge students should attain to reflect adequate or excellent learning standards.

In Chapter Four, Bers identified the challenges of program assessment at community colleges. These challenges include difficulty in defining a program, the very diverse course-taking patterns of students, and the large percentage of students who take courses at multiple institutions or from colleges within or outside multicampus institutions.

Similar challenges exist at the institutional level. These challenges are compounded by the fact that colleges have no experience or models for how to develop and sustain a comprehensive effort for assessing student learning outcomes at the institutional level.

Recommendations Directed to Community College Practitioners. Faculty need to have an understanding of how student learning outcomes assessment

at the course and program levels contributes to institutional goal achievement. As stated earlier, colleges should provide faculty in each department or discipline with the training and technical support required to develop meaningful and measurable student learning outcomes. Colleges need to develop strategies to ensure that the methods identified for assessing student learning outcomes are used consistently by all faculty members, including those teaching part-time, evenings, and in off-campus locations or through alternative instructional methods such as online and distance learning.

Faculty need to have systematic feedback on the extent to which the assessment conducted is making a difference in student learning and providing success at the course, program, and institutional levels. Assessing student learning outcomes should result in a clear identification of skills, competencies, and disposition toward learning with which students need additional assistance.

Faculty should have viable options for providing students with the assistance needed in a timely fashion. One of the options must address how to integrate student support programs and services effectively with the classroom instructional processes.

Recommendations Directed to State and Accrediting Agencies. State agencies and regional community colleges consortia should promote inter-institutional networks of faculty and co-curricular support staff to facilitate sharing of teaching and assessment techniques at both the discipline and institution-wide levels.

States should encourage, if not require, faculty from community colleges and four-year institutions to work jointly in developing standard student learning outcomes for each lower-division course in each major for which articulation agreements exist. Developing common student learning outcomes, methods for assessing the attainment of those outcomes, and standards of achievement should result in stronger articulation of courses and programs, easier student transition from community colleges to transfer institutions, and a greater degree of sharing and collaboration among faculty on best practices in pedagogy and assessment. Similar collaboration is needed in the area of co-curricular programs and services.

States should consider developing curriculum guidelines for remedial, core general education, and occupational education courses for which there is no specialized accreditation or external certification. These curriculum frameworks could include identification of student learning outcomes to be achieved; examples of assessment measures, tests, or other instruments that could be used; and illustrations of effective instructional strategies for promoting the attainment of desired student learning outcomes. Faculty and staff from all segments of education, secondary and post-secondary, should be involved in developing and updating these curriculum frameworks.

Fourth Challenge. Implementing and sustaining a comprehensive student learning outcomes assessment effort in a community college setting is difficult. As previously noted, the processes community colleges can follow

to build support for and engage faculty and staff in the development of assessment of student learning outcomes have been well documented. However, as Serban pointed out in Chapter Two, what is missing from the literature are specific models for developing, implementing, and sustaining comprehensive assessment efforts that take into account the particular features of a community college setting. These include multiple and diverse missions; transient student populations with various educational goals and needs, which frequently do not include completing courses, programs, certificates, or degrees in the prescribed sequence; a large cadre of part-time faculty; delivery of instruction and services in multiple locations of an institution; and limited technical staff to support all phases of student learning outcomes assessment.

Beno notes in Chapter Six that accrediting agencies anticipate that it will take colleges ten to fifteen years to implement their student learning outcomes assessment initiatives. A significant challenge facing community colleges is the lack of adequate time, resources, and incentives to engage in an educational reform of this magnitude. This is particularly the case now that colleges have entered once again into an era of scarce resources, when faculty and staff feel overextended, and institutional budgets continue to be constrained if not reduced.

Recommendations Directed to Community College Practitioners. In developing their overall plans for assessment, colleges need to take into consideration the financial and human resources required to support implementing and sustaining such efforts. As previously noted, colleges need to allocate or re-allocate resources to such areas as training, technical support staff, development of information systems needed to capture assessment data, and staff to analyze, report, and disseminate assessment results.

In order to sustain such an effort, colleges need to provide each of their constituencies with evidence that this allocation of scarce resources results in improved student learning and achievement greater than might have been achieved had the resources been applied differently.

Given the magnitude of what colleges are being asked to achieve, coupled with the lack of adequate models, tools, and staff and financial resources to do so, colleges will be well advised to focus their efforts to assess and improve student learning outcomes in a limited number of courses and programs. If successful, they can generalize their approaches to other parts of the curriculum.

Recommendations Directed to State and Accrediting Agencies. As noted by Milam, Voorhees, and Bedard-Voorhees in Chapter Seven, accrediting agencies have spearheaded the drive for institutions to measure student learning outcomes prior to their having evidence that the new requirements will in fact produce the desired results. Furthermore, they are requiring each institution to engage in this transformational effort with limited guidance on what is expected in terms of student learning outcomes to be achieved or effective models and tools for doing so. This has resulted in

each institution having to spend far more time and resources than would have been required had the accrediting agencies done appropriate pilot testing and evaluation of the success of their requirements prior to imposing them on all institutions. Since some accrediting agencies have been asking for such evidence for an extended period of time, it is now time for them to step back and evaluate their requirements and to provide community colleges with much greater guidance and assistance than now exists.

State agencies need to define what they expect from community colleges in terms of student learning outcomes assessment. Moreover, there is a lack of connection between what states are requesting for institutional accountability and what accrediting agencies are now requiring of colleges with respect to student learning outcomes assessment. As noted by Burke and Minassians in Chapter Five, to date, states have limited their performance measures to institutional outputs (such as number of degrees, licensure exam rates, number of transfers, enrollment trends, time to degree, and college participation rates) rather than to student learning outcomes. The state measures have not taken into account the multiple missions and diverse clientele of community colleges. Similarly, the states need to identify what resources and incentives they need to provide to sustain the college student learning outcomes assessment efforts.

Conclusion

The chapters in this volume cover many of the critical components of assessment of student learning outcomes. They provide an overview of the issues, methods, and challenges that community colleges face in developing and implementing core components of their student learning outcomes assessment initiatives. In addition, the volume includes many specific examples from colleges across the country of how various components of student learning outcomes assessment have been developed and implemented.

While each of the authors underscored the importance of measuring student learning outcomes, they each noted the formidable challenges colleges face in doing so. The purpose of this chapter was to identify the major challenges that, if not addressed, will continue to serve as barriers to realizing fully the anticipated benefits of requiring colleges to measure student learning outcomes. We have noted that much can be done by state and accrediting agencies, as well as by the colleges themselves, to help overcome these challenges. In addition, universities with graduate programs for higher education should consider offering specialized training for graduate students and practitioners in all aspects of student learning outcomes assessment. Graduate schools should incorporate into their teaching training programs methods for assessing and improving the attainment of student learning outcomes. Researchers in all disciplines need to focus more of their efforts on identifying, evaluating, and disseminating effective strategies for measuring and improving attainment of desired student learning outcomes.

Reference

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JACK FRIEDLANDER is executive vice president for educational programs at Santa Barbara City College in Santa Barbara, California.

ANDREEA M. SERBAN is associate vice president for information resources and director of institutional assessment, research, and planning at Santa Barbara City College in Santa Barbara, California.

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