

Student Learning Outcomes: What they are or can be, What they are not or should not be, and What they require (5/2009)

A De Anza College Academic Senate Brief Position Paper

Background

Two decades ago, a movement towards increased accountability for California Community Colleges began. There have been many products of that movement. One of the products of the movement has been a push to measure student achievement by some means other than the traditional faculty grading system.

In this vein, the Accrediting Commission for Community and Junior Colleges initiated a change in the standards for accreditation to institute something now called Student Learning Outcomes (SLOs). Prior to enactment, the Academic Senate for California Community Colleges, representing California Community College faculty in academic and professional matters at the state level, boycotted the SLO development process, citing evidence that those promoting them also advocated a reduced role for faculty in the evaluation of students and institutional exit exams not dissimilar from those instituted in the K-12 system. Since becoming official, SLOs have been the center of a debate among faculty between those who like the idea of SLOs as presented by its advocates and those who are skeptical and extremely leery of the potential negative outcomes for faculty of SLOs for students. Similarly, there has been tension between those faculty less than enthusiastic about a future with SLOs and those administrators whose views and or stated intentions are congruent with those who would use SLOs for the purposes of designing new faculty evaluation tools and exit exams for students.

What they are or can be

Student Learning Outcomes are defined by the Academic Senate as:

Student Learning Outcomes are overarching, clear, and assessable statements that identify and define what a student is able to do at the successful completion of a specific course, program, activity, or process. These outcomes may involve a

combination of knowledge, skills/abilities, and/or attitudes that display behavioral evidence that learning has occurred at a specific level of competency. Learning outcomes require a shift in perspective from what is taught to what is learned.

The ongoing assessment of learning outcomes is for the purpose of promoting and enhancing student learning and improving institutional and program performance. The ongoing assessment of learning outcomes is specifically linked to the De Anza College planning and budget process.

They have the purpose outlined by the Academic Senate as follows:

The purpose of Student Learning Outcomes is to establish and institutionalize cyclical processes and procedures developed and driven by De Anza faculty and staff to define and assess specific observable characteristics or outcomes that demonstrate evidence of learning that has occurred as a result of a specific course, program, activity, or process.

What they are not or should not be

- An end in itself or busy work that has no relation to teaching and learning.
- A means to evaluate individual faculty or staff other than private self evaluation.
- A way to impinge on academic freedom.
- A solution to every problem on campus or an answer to all questions about students and learning.
- A method to reorganize the administrative structure of the campus.
- A step towards an institutional exit exam or the elimination of grading.

What they require

In order for the institution of SLOs to be an orderly, successful, and promising development for De Anza College, several ingredients must be in place and maintained over time:

1. The Administrative and Classified staff must recognize that SLOs, while a key part of accreditation and therefore affecting the institution as a whole, must be primarily a faculty matter through Curriculum, Staff Development, and Academic Senate Executive Committee processes.
2. The development and implementation processes must be supported by faculty, classified staff, and administration to provide the time and resources necessary for successful implementation acceptable to faculty and the accrediting commission.
3. There must be ongoing support for the kinds of staff development activities which will inform and foster exemplary accreditation results.