“They’re Back”
Accreditation Return to Chaffey

“Hey’re back,” was the statement Carol Anne Freeling, the young daughter in the 1986 supernatural horror film Poltergeist II: The Other Side, said that announced the return of something so evil and wicked that a generation of Americans avoided static filled televisions, creepy clowns and made sure to check that the homes they were buying were not built on old cemeteries. Accreditation, wasn’t little Carol’s return visitor, but it ours. It is hard to believe that six years have passed since the visiting team reaffirmed our accreditation status. A lot has changed over those six brief years: ACCJC, the accrediting agency for Chaffey has come under increased scrutiny following is questionable evaluation of City College of San Francisco, the accreditation standards themselves have changed, but most importantly the requirements for Student Learning Outcomes (SLOs) have been increased.

As of 2012, ACCJC requires that every community college to be at the proficiency level for SLOs. ACCJC defines “SLO proficiency” as:

• Student learning outcomes and authentic assessment are in place for courses, programs and degrees.
• Results of assessment are being used for improvement and further alignment of institution-wide practices.
• There is widespread institutional dialogue about the results.
• Decision-making includes dialogue on the results of assessment and is purposefully directed toward improving student learning.
• Appropriate resources continue to be allocated and fine-tuned.
• Comprehensive assessment reports exist and are completed on a regular basis.
• Course student learning outcomes are aligned with degree student learning outcomes.
• Students demonstrate awareness of goals and purposes of courses and programs in which they are enrolled.

To assist with the college’s efforts to prepare for the visit later this year, the SLO Down newsletter will be featuring articles, checklists and FAQs to insure that your program is “proficient” with SLOs and ready for any questions that the visiting team might have for you. We all remember what happened to that poor little girl and her family when “they” came to visit. Accreditation is much scarier, so don’t let it happen to you when “they” come to visit us later this year.
Accreditation and Student Learning Outcomes FAQs:

1. In what accreditation standards are SLOs and assessment specifically referenced?

The following standards address the specifics of the expectations of the commission in regard to Student Learning Outcomes and Assessment:
II.A.1.c; II.A.2.a; II.A.2.b; II.A.2.e; II.A.2.f; II.A.2.g; II.A.2.h; II.A.2.i; II.A.3

2. How does ACCJC define a college being “Proficient” in Student Learning Outcomes Assessment?

There are eight characteristics (the following are quoted directly from the rubric):

- Student learning outcomes and authentic assessment are in place for courses, programs and degrees.
- Results of assessment are being used for improvement and further alignment of institution-wide practices.
- There is widespread institutional dialogue about the results.
- Decision-making includes dialogue on the results of assessment and is purposefully directed toward improving student learning.
- Appropriate resources continue to be allocated and fine-tuned.
- Comprehensive assessment reports exist and are completed on a regular basis.
- Course student learning outcomes are aligned with degree student learning outcomes.
- Students demonstrate awareness of goals and purposes of courses and programs in which they are enrolled.

3. How does ACCJC define Student Learning Outcomes?

Knowledge, skills, abilities, and attitudes that a student has attained at the end (or as a result) of his or her engagement in a particular set of collegiate experiences.

4. What does ACCJC mean when it says, “The institution disaggregates and analyzes learning outcomes and achievement for subpopulations of students” in Standard I.B.6?

Collected longitudinally, such data and analyses will inform the college whether changes in pedagogy or services are effective in improving student completion, or whether a decline in student completion needs to be given attention and study so that trends can be reversed. It will also keep institutions informed about fluctuations and serve as a warning if completion rates decrease and trends need to be reversed. When collected in disaggregated form, it may also provide information about barriers to completion and transfer, the need to collect additional data, and indicate attention that needs to be given to various groups. Examples of disaggregated data include delivery modes, site location, age and gender.
Where do Course SLO’s Live?

By Dr. John Nixon, Commissioner, with Dr. Barbara Beno, President

The article seeks to add some clarity to the dialogue between and among member institutions, particularly the faculty members, about what the Standards require. The interpretation and application of SLOs at the course level has generated four common questions:

How do course SLOs relate to learning objectives?
Must SLOs be consistent across all sections/classes of a course?
Must SLOs appear in official institutional documents such as the official course outline or catalogue?
Must SLOs appear in the faculty members’ course syllabi?

In an ideal situation, intended student learning outcomes should be the foundation upon which a course is developed. Faculty first define the learning outcomes they expect successful students to achieve and demonstrate, and then from those intended outcomes, design the course. Pedagogy, learning environment, and learning support materials all follow from intended SLOs.

Realistically, many course designs have been driven by other matters, including transfer institution requirements for general education, articulation agreements, course sequencing, and the notion of the canon of course objectives—what the course will “cover.” Vocational or technical courses may have begun with intended learning outcomes as the basis for design, but most institutions are really adding student learning outcomes onto existing academic courses. Nevertheless, a good course (and on that successfully addresses accreditation requirements) identifies the intended SLOs for the course, as well as the means of authentically assessing whether and how well students learn.

How do course SLOs relate to learning objectives?

Most of the confusion about the difference between SLOs and learning objectives lies in the term “objectives.” Generally, objectives specify discrete steps taken within an educational program to achieve an outcome. They are means, not the ends. So the “course” objectives specified by the California public college system’s Academic Senate, for example, are defined as follows: “Objectives are the key elements which must be taught each time the course is taught.” Course SLOs are the intended learning outcomes; objectives are the things that must be taught/covered in order to achieve those learning outcomes. Sometimes, these things are very close; often, they are quite distant.

Must SLOs be consistent across all sections/classes of a course?

With SLOs defined in part as the foundation of a course, the ACCJC requirement is that each course has a single set of SLOs that is common to all sections/classes of the course, no matter who teaches the section of class (Standards II.A.6 and II.A.6.c.). This assures that all students will know what to expect as the potential outcomes of completing a course successfully. One might refer to that set of SLOs as “core” SLOs for the course. This also means each faculty member teaching the course must ensure the core SLOs are adequately addressed in the pedagogy, pacing, educational materials, learning environment and assessment strategies of the individual classroom. A question often asked is: Can individual faculty choose different strategies and course materials to help students achieve the same core SLOs? The answer is, “That depends on whether the strategies are appropriate to help students learn the intended SLOs.” Accreditation Standards ask institutions to analyze learning and to use the results to guide improvements in learning by changing pedagogy, curriculum, etc. (Standards II.A.1.c, II.A.2, II.A.2.a, b, e and f). So, diverse strategies among faculty will be a means of identifying diverse approaches to high quality education and, over time, of identifying which strategies should be abandoned in favor of more effective approaches. In addition, some faculty may want or need to emphasize additional SLOs within a course. As long as students are notified of all courses SLOs, this practice is acceptable. (See the last question and the answer in the article.)

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Must SLOs appear in official institutional documents such as the official course outline or catalogue?

Since a course must have a single set of core SLOs, it is reasonable to expect those SLOs to appear in the official course outline which guides the faculty teaching the course. The Commission’s use of the phrase “official course outline” refers to the document used by the institution to define its official curriculum. Should the SLOs appear in the catalogue? The catalogue serves as a contract between the institution and its students. Standard II.A.6 states that “The institution describes its degrees and certificates in terms of their purpose, content, course requirements and student learning outcomes.” It is clear the degree and certificate learning outcomes have to be in the catalogue. In practice, some current institutional catalogues, particularly those in print copy, do not provide a great deal of detail on course content. Others do. In any case, the intended course SLOs ought to be accessible to students who are contemplating taking the course, either in the catalogue or through a link or other reference catalogue.

Must SLOs appear in the faculty members’ course syllabi?

Yes. The answer to this question appears at the beginning of this article, in the quotation from Standard II.A.6. The Commission acknowledges that the use of the words “learning objectives” in this standard appears to be vestigial language from the 1994 Standards. The Commission is currently editing the standards to change the words “learning objectives” to “student learning outcomes.”

Just as important as the existence and placement of SLOs is their assessment and the use of assessment results to improve educational effectiveness and learning. These topics will be covered in the future articles appearing in this newsletter.

This article appears in the Accreditation Notes Newsletter.

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