The Student Learning Outcomes (SLO) Library and Three Faculty Perspectives

By Janet Fulks, California Academic Student Curriculum Committee

During the Fall 2008 Plenary Session, a resolution calling for the Academic Senate to begin collecting SLOs for a library was passed by a close margin. The library's purpose was to provide examples of SLOs from across the state so that hard-working faculty would have the option of looking at SLOs from other schools to help them with their own work. The vote was so close that it not only required a verbal yeah and nay, but a standing vote as well. Finally, because the numbers looked so close, a serpentine vote (counting off) was needed to get a final tally. The library passed by only one vote. What does that mean?

For those of you on the unofficial curriculum and accreditation listservs, run by Jon Drinnon of Merritt College, this vote may have you scratching your heads because the resolution for the library occurred at your request. For those of you on the SLO coordinators listserv, your first thought may be: "Why in the world would anyone vote against this?" Your faculty have been asking you for examples of SLOs in their disciplines, and here was an opportunity to serve their needs. If you have not been very involved in the SLO effort on your campus, you may be surprised at how much support there was for the library. Hasn't the Academic Senate passed resolutions strongly against SLOs in the past? What is happening here?

It seems to me there are potentially three groups of faculty across the state with different attitudes about SLOs and their assessment:

1. The first group of faculty is working with SLO assessment. These faculty want to look at other colleges as part of a research and vetting process to validate their own thinking and direction. They do not want to copy other people's SLOs nor do they see this as standardization. They want resources! They are motivated by the positive curricular dialog that is occurring as part of the SLO process. They see the real and potential involvement of adjuncts in the assessment process as an asset as well as the natural connection between SLO assessment and program review. They desire to continuously inquire, "How can I do my work better?" Some California community college faculty, some colleges, and some professional groups have already started websites to collect SLOs for review, but a local or discipline specific website is not comprehensive enough to help entire colleges in the same way the Academic Senate library has the potential to help.

2. The second group of faculty have been exposed to SLOs on their campus. They realize this is a mandated activity that isn't going away. Some want to see examples as potential models to emulate or to avoid, while others want to use someone else's SLOs so as to get around the perceived additional workload and fulfill (albeit very superficially) what they know is a mandate. The latter motivation is scary. Perhaps some of these faculty haven't yet experienced the richness of dialog about SLOs that is occurring at other schools, so they can't see its value. Yet without this dialog, SLOs and assessment methods adopted directly from someone else just to save time is the worst kind of self-imposed standardization. It reduces the purpose of it to busywork and takes away the meaning and authenticity that can occur. Worse yet, it doesn't help faculty teach better nor help students to learn.

Continue on page 2
3. The third group of faculty is made up of those who have adamantly fought against SLOs and wishfully hope they will go away, while clinging to the belief that a change of politics in Washington will help their dreams come true. These faculty will vote down an SLO library that others would use, even knowing that their colleagues have asked for the it, because they see it as a principled stand against standardization. They are probably not involved in the SLO efforts on their campus or know little about how it is working at other colleges. They want the Academic Senate to continue to resist SLO work in all its forms.

These three groups battled it out in the vote for an SLO library. As I listened to the discussion, I realized that many faculty in the third group had not followed the national scene and seemed unaware that the proverbial accountability train has "left the station". They were unaware of its strong support from both major political parties or that Ted Kennedy is one of the authors of No Child Left Behind. The federal and state legislatures have made their insistence on accountability clear, and the new administration has stated its support for it as well. Since the legislatures invest a large portion of the budget in education, they want to know someone is at home looking at the quality of that investment.

As an individual, I have to admit that I agree with the legislative view as I have pursued my own doctorate and paid for my own children to go to college. I want the course work to make sense, across the institution and within the individual courses. I want to complete a prerequisite, or have my children complete one, and know that it is truly preparation for the next class. At my college, we never even discussed curriculum content, assessment and alignment of prerequisites broadly before SLOs.

Now, it is a major topic of conversation. I want to know that when my students, my own children or I finish a program of study, it is more than a loose collection of topics. Class content and work is not at the whim of the random collection of faculty whose classes I registered to take. It is a professional and well reasoned set of topics and work that coordinate and make my investment of time and money valuable. I want that program to provide me with skills and knowledge I can use in the real world (known as outcomes). Finally, as a professional teacher, I want to be fair to my students. I want to improve in everything I do. I want a reason to discuss the discipline issues and to talk with other departments and community members that are part of the holistic pathway through the program I teach in.

The third group of faculty also seemed unaware that in the debate over the Higher Education Act, Congress made it clear that higher education must prove that it can provide accountability through SLO assessment and peer review (the current system of accreditation) to validate our work. If this method does not work, and we have five years to show that it does, Congress has promised an uglier situation with mandated SLOs from the federal government. Perhaps some faculty in the second group may like that better. After all, that is less work.

But many of us in the first group have already jumped on the accountability train and are trying to command it by retaining faculty primacy over curriculum and SLOs and program review. This is work, but at the same time we have found that after the initial effort, the payoff is worth it! The results range from aligned curriculum and programs to fair grading, from excellent professional dialog to program review with meaning.

So, the SLO library will come into existence over the next year. It will be a resource, not a standard, providing discipline and program level SLOs (and hopefully some potential assessment methods) so faculty can better do their good work.
Submission to the library will be voluntary and will follow set guidelines. The Senate's Accreditation and SLO Committee, in conjunction with the Curriculum Committee, are designing a website shell that should allow easy submission and provide effective search engines. So, if you have ideas or desires with regards to the library, please send them ahead to jfulks@bakersfieldcollege.edu. If you are uneasy or worried and voted down the library, send your concerns as well. You may have thoughts we have not yet considered, and we want this to be a well-developed, safe and useful library.

This is an academic endeavor that involves all of us. We must keep talking so that the three groups can gradually become one, a faculty united, focused on what is best for our students and for teaching and learning.

Dialog is key. And so is education. Watch for a paper on what is working with SLOs across the state coming this spring from the Accreditation and SLO Committee. Keep abreast of dialog in Washington regarding accreditation and accountability. Above all, keep talking to your colleagues, those who are in all three groups. Like we demand of our students, we all need to learn from different points of view.

SLO Faculty Success Center Workshops for March

Creating a Multi-Year Assessment Plan

Have you been asked to create your program’s assessment plan or been appointed the assessment coordinator for your program? This workshop will introduce you to two planning tools available to help you create a meaningful, actionable, and sustainable assessment plan.

Who should attend: Faculty & Staff
Format: Interactive Workshop
Date/time/location: March 31, 12:30-2:00, Room ATL 109
Presented by: Marie Boyd and Tom Vitzelio

To RSVP for any of the workshops please contact the Faculty Success Center at 909-652-6974 or email them at Facultysuccesscenter@chaffey.edu
SLO Down Links of Interest

- Indiana University Northwest
  - http://www.iun.edu/~caslo/
- National Institute for Learning Outcomes Assessment
  - http://www.learningoutcomeassessment.org/index.html

SLO Down Contact Information

Marie Boyd, SLO Co-Coordinator
Phone: 909.652.6968
E-mail: marie.boyd@chaffey.edu

Tom Vitzelio, SLO Co-Coordinator
Phone: 909.652.8152
E-mail: tom.vitzelio@chaffey.edu

Interested in assisting with the S.L.O. Down? Contact either Marie Boyd or Tom Vitzelio.

The Chaffey College SLO Committee

SLO Committee Members for 2010-2011

Co-Chairs
Marie Boyd, Curriculum Chair
Tom Vitzelio, Instructional Specialist Success Centers

Committee Members
Mamta Agarwal, Chemistry
William Araiza, Library
Graciela Arriaga, EOPS
Sid Burks, Dean of Business and Applied Technology
Misty Burrell, Art
Merrill Deming, Dean of Math and Sciences
Shelley Eckvahl, Nursing
Jim Fillpot, Director, Institutional Research
Sherrie Guerrero, Vice President of Instruction
Annette Henry, Physical Education
Laura Hope, Dean of Instructional Support

Support Staff
Monica Han, Instructional Support
Giovanni Sosa, Institutional Research

Committee Members
Sonia Juarez, Student Activities
Dave Karp, Business
Daniel Kern, Philosophy
Christine Lively, Modern Languages ASL
Bruce Osburn, Automotive Technology
Carli Straight, Institutional Research
Victoria Tirado, Spanish
Lori Waite, Dean of Counseling