

DRAFT

Accreditation and Effectiveness at Meeting SLOs as Promotion Criteria: A Senate White Paper

In June 2002, the Accrediting Commission for Community and Junior Colleges (ACCJC) of the Western Association of Schools and Colleges (WASC) approved a new version of its Accreditation Standards. Included in Standard III Resources (Part A.1.c) was the following statement:

Faculty and others directly responsible for student progress toward achieving stated student learning outcomes have, as a component of their evaluation, effectiveness in producing those learning outcomes. (15)

Controversial from its initial release, Standard III.A.1.c for the first time mandated that effectiveness in producing learning outcomes was to be part of an individual faculty member's classroom evaluation, instead of a component of program evaluation where aggregated student cohorts of the department or discipline are used.

Initial objections from faculty members at our medium-sized campus, Leeward Community College in Pearl City, Hawaii, to the **Accrediting Commission for Community and Junior Colleges' Standard III.A.1.c** focused on the inappropriateness of using effectiveness data (achievement testing) under an open-admission system where students often score below high school levels in reading and math comprehension on placement examinations. In an article in *New Directions for Community Colleges* (Summer 2004), ACCJC Executive Director Barbara Beno wrote

The accreditors' concern with assessment of student learning is not meant to target individual faculty members, but to stimulate institution-wide engagement with student learning and institution-wide improvement in learning. (69)

However, no other effort was made to mitigate the effect of III.A.1.c. In fact, during a visit of one of the ACCJC directors who had formally been associated with the campus in January 2006 [?], faculty were advised to “deal with it,” an indication that negative reaction to the proposed standard may perhaps have

become a sore spot.

Education Secretary Margaret Spellings exacerbated the situation with her repeated calls for institutions to offer proof of academic effectiveness via objective methods of student learning such as learning-outcome measures. The mandate for accreditors was to establish minimum levels of achievement, all seemingly based on the adaptation of the idea of “No Child Left Behind” to post-secondary education. Numerous public interchanges during the Bush administration with university & college presidents and other educational leaders, such as Judith S. Eaton, president of the Council for Higher Education Accreditation, challenged the federal government’s right to insert itself into accrediting standards and procedures as a means of safeguarding its student aid programs.

Student Learning Outcomes, an outgrowth of the refocus on student learning as opposed to faculty teaching, have themselves been controversial. Faculty have long supported and engaged in assessment: the merit of determining how well students were learning and how they were succeeding in subsequent classes has been recognized and appreciated for decades. In earlier iterations, the measurement component was stacked up against course or discipline goals and objectives. Any teacher worthy of the profession has intrinsically been interested in the ability of students to perform and anxious to know, at the end of a course of study, what they knew and what they could do. In the absence of positive improvement, any teacher worthy of the profession has also used classroom assessments to make pedagogical changes, either under personal initiative or in consultation with colleagues as to methods that worked for them. The most successful combination of presentation, interaction, and evaluation is always evolving, always being perfected. Any teacher worthy of the profession would not visualize teaching without learning. They are, in effect, a continuum, interdependent and interrelated. To then have the concept of

“student centered learning” introduced as a *revolution* was initially more amusing than inspiring. Education is one of the professions noted for trends: faculty members who have been teaching for a few decades have seen some come around more than once. So, the new terminology for objectives was outcomes. (In the 1970s, the concept of “classroom learning objectives” being tested for achievement was the translation of a new, “computer” based system of MBO, or management by objective, popular in Schools of Business across the nation.)

If initially the construct of student centered learning was entertaining, the consequences were not so whimsical. ACCJC’s attempt to tie success at reaching SLOs to promotion and tenure demonstrated little understanding of the two-tiered layer of instruction at the community college level. Effectiveness at producing learning outcomes is one thing in classes with hierarchical antecedents, for example proceeding from a HIST 151 to a HIST152 course. A corollary of open admission, however, is that in entry-level classes, students coming into the system in increasing numbers are underprepared, immature, and poorly motivated. In reading placement alone, grade level equivalent on Nelson Denny testing (forms G and H) can vary from the 5th to the 14th grade level on our campus, although mandated system-level testing places them at the same level. In a developmental reading class, faculty members are not averse to assuming the responsibility for helping a student get from one grade level to the next. In the context of SLOs, however, effectiveness means one thing from 11th to 12th, and another from 5th to 12th. There is a randomness to this measure of ability since it is based on the students who choose to enroll in a particular class. Some classes will have less variation in abilities, while others will be substantial.

As a consequence, new faculty members who are, according to current accreditation criteria, dependent on success in meeting SLOs to obtain tenure or promotion might conceivably determine that the lower the standard, the better the chance of achieving it.

Students matriculating from local public high schools can be achingly deficient in the underpinnings of both their native language and numerical ability. In entry-level English classes, confusion over the use and functions of basic parts of speech is the norm. Confusion about the structure of an English sentence is also a given, much less the organization of a paragraph. One or two students in a classroom of twenty may have read a novel. Our developmental math instructors begin with general understanding of basic math functions before they can proceed to algebra. High school students have related spending half the academic year reviewing material from the prior year, which would reduce four years of curriculum to two and explain some of the gaps. (To be fair, high school teachers in the islands face their own set of seemingly insurmountable obstacles to reaching parity with private schools.)

As a consequence, faculty members who teach at the community college level are being held responsible for meeting SLOs premised on higher education standards regardless of the preparedness of their students. Their own success at meeting tenure and promotion criteria will be compromised under current accreditation standards that mandate effectiveness with many students who, under an open admission model, are reading at the 5th through 9th grade level.

The idea that almost everyone has the reading, reasoning, and writing potential to attend college is, and—should we need to add—always has been mistaken. What has changed in recent years is that financial aid and scholarships have become more available to deserving students, so that the option of professional career education is no longer limited to only those who can afford it. However, under an open admission paradigm, undistinguished high school achievement is no longer a deterrent to getting into an institution of higher learning. In Hawaii, the state social service agencies have also managed to send community colleges, under various programs, people with psychological issues (good therapy), social issues (opportunity to interact), and lately, the intellectually challenged (mental stimulation). The faculty members who have worked with the

latter will assert that there is nothing more heartless than allowing students with limited potential to believe they are college material before they fail to make the grade.

As a consequence, faculty members are held to a standard that their charges are not.

Finally, and as we are continually recognizing, not everyone has—particularly at the age of 18—the maturity to profit from higher education. This is also not new. Recent data from the Community College Survey of Student Engagement (CCSSE) is indicating that on our campus, 60% of our full-time students (minimum of 4 classes) report preparing from only 1—5 hours a week. On the national level, only 24% of students report they are always prepared for their classes [2008 National Report, 13]. Charles Murray, W.H. Brady Scholar at the American Enterprise Institute, ends a recent (9/1/08) article in *Forbes* Magazine with the recommendation that parents of high school students getting close to graduation should “sequester the college tuition money.”

Encourage your child to join the military, work abroad as a volunteer for some worthy cause or just move to a different city, get a real job and support himself for a few years. There’s no intellectual loss in delaying college. On, the contrary, your child will probably gain from the wait. Plato and Tolstoy were not writing for kids. The real danger lies in raising children who reach their 20s still thinking like children. The years after high school are for learning how to be a grown-up. (32)

Murray’s conclusion is that colleges are not good places to grow up because of changes in professors’ expectations, students’ workloads, and residential life. At the community college level, faculty members, particularly in developmental classes, can struggle with those students who believe that their commuter campuses are continuations of high school. Social interaction trumps learning.

As a consequence, college faculty members are now also held responsible for the motivation of their adult students and left wondering what the responsibility of the student is in this new paradigm.

From the faculty perspective, we *can't* "deal" with classroom effectiveness in reaching SLOs as a part of evaluation on the basis of several considerations, both realistic and sobering in their natural consequences.

We shouldn't have to.