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Smoothing Communication about new Accreditation Requirements

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Smoothing Communication about new Accreditation Requirements

The federal government and the United States Department of Education have used accreditation as a means to assure quality for over fifty years. Over the past two decades, however, they, and others, have questioned whether accreditation, without measures of student learning, can assure quality that meets the needs of students, government, and the public (Eaton, 2003). To ensure that accreditation assess quality that meets those needs, Congress enacted the *Recognition Standards* in the Higher Education Act that mandate accrediting commissions assess and report student learning outcomes (SLO), and accrediting commissions complied with revised standards that meet those requirements.

As soon as the Western Association of Schools and Colleges (WASC) began introducing drafts of the revised standards for accrediting California Community Colleges (CCC), faculty across CCC raised concerns about how this change in accreditation standards would cause a loss of faculty control over curricular matters and perhaps the imposition of external standards in the classroom. There is evidence to support such concerns. Research findings confirm "what gets measured is what gets valued" (Burke, Minassians, & Yang, 2002, p. 15). The Academic Senate for the California Community Colleges (ASCCC) argues that, as evidenced in the research on the effect of K-12 reforms, imposing SLO in accreditation could result in imposed standards and tests as well as tendencies of faculty to teach to the standards (Simpson, 2002). Conversely, policy makers argue that a loss of faculty control over curricular matters is acceptable to assure quality (Shulock & Moore, 2002).

All of the stakeholders in the discussion clearly share the goals of assuring quality in educational institutions and increasing student success. Further, it is unlikely that WASC will change the requirement that assessing student learning outcomes be a substantial component of

the accreditation process. Understanding, then, how faculty might accept and implement new accreditation standards is essential to college administrators.

Problem Statement - The Problem of Implementation

In late 2004, the Western Association of Schools and Colleges began using revised standards for accrediting California Community Colleges (CCC). However, powerful groups among faculty, such as the state Academic Senate and local college academic senates, continue to oppose the new requirements because of fears of losing control over curriculum and a belief that assessing student learning outcomes will not improve the quality of teaching or learning. Analyzing which methods of sharing information about SLOs are effective in encouraging faculty acceptance of the new WASC requirements, through an application of aspects of Rogers' theory of diffusion of innovation, can help overcome objections and guide effective communication processes on all campuses.

Setting the Stage - Plan of the Paper

The requirement to assess student learning outcomes is a novel idea, recently adopted by the American Association of Community and Junior Colleges for WASC accreditation. Research suggests that many faculty oppose this new requirement, because it threatens faculty autonomy and control over the curriculum.

To interpret faculty opposition, and to begin identifying ways in which that opposition can be channeled into constructive discourse and implementation, the following section of this paper reviews Rogers' theory of the diffusion of innovation. Rogers posits that organizational members who are involved early in supporting a new idea can influence others to accept it or reject it.

Following the review of Rogers' theory, the paper will discuss data gathered in interviews and focus groups with community college faculty and administrators to reveal their attitudes as well as common communication channels for transmitting their personal reactions to this new requirement. Finally, this paper will make recommendations about using communication channels to smooth the implementation of student learning outcomes assessment to meet accreditation requirements.

Communication Channels as Predictors of Adoption of New Ideas

Rogers' theory of how new ideas are spread across an organization contribute to an analysis of the rate of acceptance as well as effective mechanisms for acceptance.

The Role of Early Leaders

Most individuals in a social system base their decisions about a new idea on the decisions of others in their social system. After 10-25% of faculty and administrators embrace student learning outcomes assessment as a positive change, others are likely to join these early leaders in accepting the new WASC requirements.

Elements of Diffusion

Rogers describes diffusion as a "special type of communication" (Rogers, 2003, p. 6) that is about a new idea which involves the reduction of uncertainty through information sharing within a social system. Whether or not the idea is historically new is not important; what is important is that potential adopters perceive the idea as new.

Although the practice of measuring SLOs is not a new idea in the national perspective, it is perceived by most faculty members in CCC as a newly mandated practice (Simpson, 2002). In cases where potential adopters perceive an idea as new, interpersonal communication, especially from other individuals who have similar status or education, - is more likely than mass media

channels such as journal articles or regulatory documents (Rogers, 2003). Similarity in interests, or homophily, among early and other potential adopters of accreditation requirements is critical to spreading acceptance of the new standards. When individuals share common values, culture, and social characteristics, communication is more likely to create new knowledge, positive attitudes and affirmative decisions to adopt the new idea. Although faculty share many values, they also exhibit some heterophily, the opposite of homophily, across a college especially in respect to teaching styles. Generally, the more homophilous the group, such as when interpersonal communication occurs between faculty within a discipline or department, the more effective the communication.

Another variable that impacts how community college professionals might accept new WASC requirements is the way in which they receive the information. Rogers notes that a staged approach in which faculty gain knowledge and then are persuaded before they are called upon to make a decision or to implement a new idea encourages adoption of new ideas. However, if faculty feel they are coerced into adopting the new requirements, they may undermine the implementation. They may formally accept the responsibility but informally reject the adoption while appearing compliant. Of course, in a complex organization like community colleges, faculty, administrators and support staff will individually acknowledge and make decisions on the WASC requirements at a variety of times, further complicating the flow of communication and adoption of this new idea.

Group norms and indigenous leadership can be expected to impact how, to what degree and with what speed community colleges implement the new WASC requirements. If opinion leaders such as the ASCCC support a formal process for assessment and improvement of student learning outcomes on a campus, it can be expected that implementation will be smoother than if

opinion leaders oppose the new requirements. Opinion leaders, such as the ASCCC, are likely to champion formal systems of assessment if governance of all aspects of the student learning outcomes assessment cycle reside in the hands of faculty, so efforts to build consensus among Academic Senate leaders about the value of shared responsibility for assessing and improving student learning is likely to garner their support (p. 27).

Herein lies the crux of external versus internal accountability. Implementing the new WASC requirements to collectively determine, measure and improve upon student learning outcomes is not optional — individual faculty cannot independently adopt or reject this national requirement. Rather, the implementation of systems for assessing and improving student learning outcomes will fall into one of two categories identified by Rogers: collective or authority innovation decisions. If the data in this research project reveals that implementation of the new requirements is a collective innovation decision — made by consensus within the existing system — we can expect that WASC will have reinforced faculty governance of curriculum decision making. On the other hand, if implementation of the new WASC requirements appears to be the result of authority innovation decisions — made by those in power positions who then require implementation — then we can expect that implementation will be swift but that faculty will surreptitiously circumvent the intent and actual practice (p. 29). In this case of circumvented intent, the new WASC requirements will have undesirable, indirect and unanticipated consequences for both individual faculty and systems of education.

The Data

Data Collection

To assess how the student learning outcomes initiative is being perceived on community college campuses in the state, four individual interviews were conducted and one regional focus

group was held. All of the interviewees and focus group participants had previously participated in workshops on developing and implementing SLO. Interviews lasted between fifteen and forty minutes. The interviewees consisted of two faculty members, one researcher, and one vocational dean. The two faculty were from a northern California college in the Sacramento area and the vocational dean and researcher were from two colleges in the greater Los Angeles area. The focus group consisted of six college teams from the San Diego and Imperial Valley areas. Teams were comprised of five to eight members usually with two instructional administrators, two to four faculty and in some cases a campus researcher. Teams usually included local senate representation and faculty from a variety of disciplines. The focus group conversation lasted approximately two hours.

The Story within the Data

All of the participants in both the focus group and interviews acknowledged that SLO were at least in part a new requirement for accreditation and for many contained some new ideas. Faculty participants in both the focus group and the interviews clearly took exception, however, to the WASC implications that SLO were not a part of the "old way" of teaching. Attendees of recent WASC workshops on SLO reported in the focus group that WASC was still saying "this is the bad old way and this is the good new way". WASC workshops, as a formal communication of new accreditation requirements, that would fix a perceived problem, raised concerns among faculty that inhibited acceptance. MB, a biology instructor and curriculum chair at a northern California college, restated the concern in her interview:

> There has been a tremendous assumption that learning has not been occurring until the document is handed to the governing body. That's the frustration. We're being asked that "when did you stop beating your wife" question. Since then, having engaged the process,

> we've discovered that it is actually very, very valuable and has started good discussions among our colleagues. (04/28/05)

Because all of the participating colleges were in different stages of the accreditation cycle, and some colleges report using the changed standards as the initial driver for attention to SLOs while others reported faculty concerns about student learning as the driver, colleges were in vastly different stages of knowledge acquisition about SLOs. In all of the discussions, however, participants recognized that awareness of SLOs was growing on their campuses. One faculty member interviewed from a college where the standards initiated the SLO discussion estimated that 75% of faculty on his campus were aware of the term "student learning outcomes" and that SLOs were now part of the accreditation process but only 10% of faculty on his campus were familiar enough to know how to develop and use the concepts in SLOs. At another college successful implementation of SLOs was evident in their focus group comments:

> At Grossmont College, we are about a year and a half away from accreditation. We're in the process of self study. We have begun the dialog in both our curriculum committee and our program review committee. There is a sense that we are embracing student learning outcomes. We are not looking at student learning outcomes implementation as a way to meet accreditation standards. This embracing of student learning outcomes appears to be infecting our colleagues. This focus on teaching and learning with an institutional focus began long before the accreditation standards were revised.

The venues for learning about SLOs also varied depending on the position held by participants in their institution (i.e., faculty administrator, or researcher). Faculty leaders, administrators and researchers reported first becoming aware of SLOs and their implementation

in accreditation at professional organization meetings which elicited differing perceptions of SLOs. Administrators saw them as new requirements to be addressed. Researchers perceived SLOs as a means to address student retention and persistence problems. Faculty leaders reported awareness particularly from the statewide academic senate institutes as concerns about the WASC imposition of SLOs in accreditation. The integration of these conceptions from such heterophilous groups would prove to be a daunting task.

Campus venues for awareness among faculty were reported as local senate meetings, national discipline conferences and departmental meetings. Generally, many faculty reported being previously unaware of student learning outcomes or specifically the language used to talk about them. Many of the parts of student learning outcomes, however, such as behavioral objectives, rubrics, assessing learning, evaluating assessments of learning, planning instructional modifications, and participating in dialogue with other faculty about student learning has been occurring although in sporadic and often inconsistent ways.

Administrators reported first hearing of the SLOs in reference to the changing accreditation standards as they were being developed in early 2002 at annual conferences. The vocational dean interviewed (04/28/05) expressed an experience on her campus that was also echoed at the focus group. Once the administrators on her campus were made aware of the new focus for the accreditation standards at professional association conferences, a group of three administrators and three faculty went to a workshop put on by the CCC Research and Planning Group (RP Group). She reported that:

> Four people continued the effort after returning to the college, meeting monthly, and then when the curriculum chair went to the academic senate faculty institute, she came back and said “thank you very much, now go away”. To the managers who were involved that

was fine, with it being one less thing they had to do, and it had started a dialogue across the campus.

At one of the colleges in the focus group, the Vice-President of Instruction and local senate president were expressing great success in collaboration between administration and the local senate on SLO implementation. The vocational dean at that college, however, stated privately, to not publicly contradict his VP of Instruction, that the same kind of "now go away" experience had happened with a group that he had participated in at his college.

Campus practices varied widely on venues for raising awareness among general faculty. One college at the focus group session reported particular success at raising awareness through faculty newsletters with articles written by faculty, for faculty. The newsletter was distributed through hardcopy via campus mailboxes. That same college was also having some success with raising awareness and more detailed how-to information through regularly scheduled monthly forums focused on SLOs. Faculty attending the monthly forums, which they reported as three to five faculty at each forum, received one hour of flex credit for each forum attendance. Many of the participants in the focus group and half of the interviewees reported that campus institutes were being held for more how-to communication of SLOs where flex credits were often available.

Nearly all of the participating colleges reported that the local senates had accepted the responsibility of implementing SLOs as being within their purview of academic matters. All of the colleges reported either revisions or plans to revise program review requirements and many were implementing revisions to the curriculum approval process to add SLO requirements that would help satisfy the accreditation requirements. At the northern California college, faculty

opinion leaders had developed a primer to SLOs that was being shared with faculty going through either the curriculum approval process or program review.

The researcher interviewed had quite a different experience with SLOs awareness that went back to the mid 1980s when his southern California campus implemented conversion of their objectives in the *course outline of record* and *course syllabi* to behavioral objectives. In the late 1990s, he participated in a workshop developed through a collaborative effort of the Chancellor's Office (CO) and the CCC Research and Planning group. Although efforts to begin implementing more ideas from the workshop back on his campus were planned, the retirement of the VP of Instruction and a new focus on other issues arising with the arrival of the new VP, those efforts were soon extinguished. Additionally, although he was very fluent in the concepts of SLOs and was presenting at SLO workshops for the RP Group sessions occurring around the state, issues other than SLO implementation that were occupying the local senate were derailing any efforts to offer or bring SLO workshops to his campus.

When asked where pockets of acceptance or resistance to SLOs were on his campus, one faculty interviewee stated that:

> There is a cluster of resistance, if you will, and that cluster of resistance tends to sit in the humanities. I think you'll find that in most institutions. The humanities and social sciences are probably the ones that will be the most resistant on any campus. If you find resistance you'll find it there; history, psychology, philosophy, humanities. You see the least resistance in vocational areas and the sciences. Those disciplines are used to measuring things anyway. The whole process does not intimidate them much. When you go to the humanities area and talk to a sociology professor and ask what it is that you expect the student to learn in your class. They are apt to say "They're

> going to learn how to think“. At some of our retreats I've been in knock down drag out fights with people when they say "You can't measure what I do. You can't measure what an education does." (04/28/05)

To demonstrate how varied faculty experience is with bringing SLO concepts to their disciplines, one faculty member in the health science area at a southern California college, reported that when bringing up some new ideas about integrating SLOs into their curriculum at a department meeting, she was admonished with "you're new, you'll get over it". She then followed that statement with "National conferences seemed to help because people come back and say 'It was not just Janet making it up.' People are finding unique strategies at conferences that will work on our campus."

Anxieties were still evident, however, on many of the campuses as reported by a few of the participants and acknowledged by most of the others. Some colleges reported that many local faculty senates were still citing the same concerns issued by the statewide academic senate in their opposition to the mandates in 2002. One participant added that on her campus the climate had changed in the senate from "Don't go there" to "What is this about?". One faculty member interviewed mentioned this conflict and also added an additional anxiety over what could be an unanticipated consequence of SLO implementation at their college:

> There is some anxiety about conflicts between mandated student learning outcomes and academic freedom. We have discussed this at our convocations. There is also a concern that we are in danger of risking the transferability of our courses if we revise the course objectives because the course objectives are part of the articulation agreements with the four year institutions. There is also anxiety in that something is being imposed from above.

There were a number of other anxieties and concerns mentioned in the discussions ranging from use of SLOs in faculty evaluations to the continuing concerns over imposition of standards in the classroom and the use of valuable time for a compliance activity.

The Application of Rogers' Theory - Integration Section

Rogers' theory of how channels of communication impact the acceptance of new ideas offers a valuable framework through which to analyze the data collected through the interviews and focus group on the adoption of SLOs in CCC. The introduction of new WASC requirements as authoritative mandates created dismay among California community colleges, a system founded on principles of a consultative model of decision making. WASC initially applied an *authority decision making* model to these new requirements, in direct contradiction to the values and beliefs of community college professionals. Because WASC did not initiate the new requirements with broad and inclusive discussions among CCC leaders, the imposition of a mandate communicated through formal channels led to vociferous opposition by the state and then local Academic Senates.

However, as the senates, both statewide and local, took charge of the implementation, many faculty perceived the decision to then be a *Collective-decision* to adopt and the formal resistance dissipated. As opinion leaders became change agents as champions for collective efforts to set, assess and improve student learning outcomes, the culture of shared governance and faculty autonomy was strengthened and SLO acceptance was facilitated.

At the same time, this research supports Rogers' theory that authority decisions are often useful in hastening the adoption of new ideas. In this research, most reports by faculty leaders, even from those embracing SLOs, stated that without the imposition of SLOs in the accreditation standards, little movement would be occurring in their adoption on their campus.

The role of the academic senates, both state and local, appears to be slowly but surely evolving from opposition to ownership. As members of the Academic Senate who saw SLOs as beneficial used informal channels of communication with their colleagues, other faculty followed their lead in accepting the new requirements. This tendency was clearly demonstrated in the data. When the only information about the new requirements came through formal channels from WASC as an authority decision to be implemented, faculty resisted the new requirements. However, when information was funneled through the Academic Senate and the ASCCC assumed control of the initiative, collective decision-making enhanced acceptance and in some cases even endorsement of the new requirements.

More importantly, when awareness and how-to information was gained through informal sharing among faculty at discipline specific conferences, even when the faculty member was previously part of the resistant group, the effectiveness of informal communication channels was further enhanced verifying the importance of informal communication channels within a homophilous group. When faculty understood that their professional norms were compatible with the adoption of SLO assessment cycles, and local senates led the way in governing the assessment process, campuses moved quickly from circumvention to putting in place mechanisms to facilitate the adoption of the new requirements. This integration of the innovation into the social norms of faculty increased and influenced the adoption, just as the theory predicts. Evidence of these increases is encapsulated by the curriculum chair's interview comment that:

> Since then, having engaged the process, we've discovered that it is actually very, very valuable and has started good discussions among our colleagues…It was something we recognized we needed to do for both internal and external reasons. It very quickly has

become a faculty dominated process and right now as curriculum chair, I'm telling everybody you will put course student learning outcomes in your course outlines.

As an understanding and acceptance of the new requirements moves from Initial Innovators to the Early Adopters and Early Majority Adopters, the role of these faculty leaders and how they and their message are perceived by potential adopters is also changed. Change agents, are transformed into facilitators of information dissemination and resources, as seen in cases where faculty put together institutes on their own campuses for disseminating the "How-to" type of knowledge. Rogers' staged approach in which faculty gain knowledge and are persuaded of the benefits of SLOs before they are called upon to make the decision to implement them to meet the new requirement would encourage adoption of SLOs as a new idea.

Although the theory of diffusion does address both individual adoption and system adoption, the data gathered was not sufficient to evaluate either individual faculty adoption or system wide adoption. Other promising studies are underway that will allow both of these areas to be explored.

Conclusions

This paper examined the effects of communication channels, social structure within CCC, group norms, roles of opinion leaders (such as faculty senate), change agents, the types of innovation-decisions made on the adoption of new WASC requirements to collectively set, assess and improve student learning outcomes. The concepts used in Rogers' Theory of Diffusion of Innovation was a remarkably good fit of theory and data for the innovation being examined. The rates of diffusion appeared, from the data collected, to support the theory in nearly all areas considered in this analysis. The theory accurately describes and allows some predictive power to determine how the communication channels and the formal structure of the

CCC statewide academic senate, local academic senates and groups of faculty influence diffusion of SLOs within their groups and how those groups influence adoption across groups within the college and system of colleges. The transition of faculty perceptions from resistance to adoption of SLO assessment systems must encourage policy makers, accreditors and community college leaders in believing that the rate of diffusion will also increase.

But a word of caution must conclude this research. Agreeing on, assessing and reflecting on student learning outcomes does not necessarily improve teaching and learning, as is the hope of accreditors. Only the strongly held professionalism of faculty can assure that development. A more thorough application of the theory on an individual local campus level could help local change agents and faculty leaders strengthen the transition from compliance to improvement.

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