Student Learning Outcomes: Practitioner Perspectives

W. Charles Wiseley, Ed.D.

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Send comments to cwiseley@outlook.com

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The efforts of policy makers to evaluate the performance of Higher Education have been discussed in the Education and Policy arenas for over two decades (Banta & Borden, 1994; Burke, 1997; Jones & Brazil, 1996): What is evaluated and how it occurs has been and remains controversial. Policymakers' efforts in the arena of Higher Education performance evaluation have evolved over the years from mandating measurement of inputs and processes to outcomes (Burke & Serban, 1997; Shulock & Moore, 2002). In the last decade, efforts to include student learning outcomes in mandated accountability have occurred as both state and federal governing bodies and regional accrediting entities begin to mandate reporting measures of student learning outcomes (SLO) (Shulock & Moore, 2002). Most educators agree that institutions should be accountable for the success of their students (Beno, Evans, & Richards, 1994; Price, Scroggins, & Stanback-Stroud, 1995). While some have embraced SLO (Friedlander & Serban, 2004), others see these mandates as an intrusion into the realm of teaching (Simpson, 2002). And, more importantly, some see dire consequences of that intrusion for systems of education and the students they serve (Clemens, 2003; Simpson, 2002).

The federal government and the United States Department of Education (USDE) have used accreditation as a means to assure quality for over 50 years. They now question, however, whether that assurance of quality meets the needs of students, government, and the public (Eaton, 2003). To ensure that accreditation assess quality that meets those needs, congress implemented requirements in the *Recognition Standards* in the Higher Education Act that mandate accrediting commissions assess and report student learning outcomes.

Most educators agree that institutions should be accountable for the success of their students and when reasonably valid and reliable measures can be developed, they can be used to

meet identified needs (Price et al., 1995). Beno, Evans, and Richards (1994) report on attitudes of faculty, staff, and administrators regarding the accreditation process and its assurance of institutional quality. The report called for new standards that incorporate requirements for "objective measures of student learning outcomes, or shifting the emphasis in the language of the standards from a focus on process and structure to a focus on student learning and success" (p. 21).

Shulock and Moore (2002) report that those in California government are convinced that there is no real accountability in higher education. In response to such criticisms of higher education accountability and accreditation, both state policy makers and accrediting bodies are either developing or implementing measurable student learning outcomes (MSLO) in their requirements to insure this quality (Shulock & Moore, 2002). While the Academic Senate and administrators alike may question why the accreditors want to mandate MSLO, Beno (2004) suggests that the movement over the past decade that resulted in the incorporation of SLO into the accreditation standards are a product of both faculty concerns about the quality of their institutions and their efforts to assess student learning in their own environments.

Much of the concern over the imposition of student learning outcomes into the accreditation process revolves around control over academic matters. Faculties are concerned that imposition of student learning outcomes into the accreditation process will result in a loss of authority over curricular matters and an eventual imposition of standards in the classroom (Clemens, 2003; Eaton, 2003; Simpson, 2002). Eaton (2003) states that many in the accrediting community also see the recent shift in federal requirements under the Higher Education Act *Recognition Standards* (i.e. that accrediting agencies require and provide evidence of institutional and student performance, rather than evaluating the processes), as a shift that will

result in further government intrusion into classrooms. Eaton (2003) issues another apprehension in that the accreditors themselves express concerns that the shift to performance and outcomes in accountability will result in a single template for quality that will decrease diversity both across and within institutions and will limit opportunities for students.

The Western Association of Schools and Colleges (WASC) began introducing drafts of revised standards for accrediting California Community Colleges (CCC) at conferences for both faculty and college administrators in 2001. While many college administrators were trying to determine how the new standards would change the accreditation process on their campuses, faculty began to issue concerns over where they perceived the new standards would take higher education. Hoke Simpson, the then president of the Academic Senate for the California Community Colleges, in a 2003 letter to the accrediting Commission for Community and Junior Colleges responded to *Draft C* of the new standards. Simpson asserts in that letter that rather than assure quality, the mandate for MSLO will lower the quality of education in community colleges. He describes how instituting MSLO will potentially damage instruction by forcing teachers to focus on the measurable. Burke, Minassians, and Yang (2002) report findings that confirm that "what gets measured is what gets valued" (p. 15). Greg Gilbert (cited in Simpson, 2003), a senator from a local community college, also issues this same concern. Gilbert argues that, as evidenced in the research on the effect of K-12 reforms, imposing MSLO in accreditation could result in imposed standards and tests as well as tendencies of faculty to teach to the standards.

Perry et al. (1998) in their report from the Academic Senate argue that this quantitative approach to measuring quality and the demand to quantify the educational process is an effort to restructure community colleges in the name of accountability. They are calls to quantify what is

really a qualitative enterprise. Simpson's 2003 letter from the Academic Senate questions why the commission is challenging the legitimacy of the already existing practices in measuring student learning and achievement. Beno (2004) reported that many institutions saw the imposition of SLO in accreditation standards as strictly a compliance issue. Miles and Wilson (2004) provide the caution that the impetus to successfully implement SLO must come from the desire of the institution and valuing of student learning. Although colleges may adopt a mandated outcomes approach to satisfy demands, given the hard work, inadequate tools, and already busy schedules, such a half hearted adoption is bound to fall short (Miles & Wilson, 2004).

All of the stakeholders in the discussion clearly share the goals of assuring quality in educational institutions and increasing student success. Whether government mandates to measure student learning outcomes, through accreditation standards, will increase or decrease quality in higher education is the question. The consequences of past reforms in K-12 provide a caution that mandating learning through standards and tests has unintended and undesirable impacts on students, teachers, and institutions. Rather than mandating the measurement and reporting of SLO, the evidence suggests that investing in research and new tools to measure student learning and providing sufficient resources to implement SLO measurement would speed the process of increasing student learning and success.

Purpose of the Study

In late 2004, the Western Association of Schools and Colleges began using revised standards for accrediting California Community Colleges (CCC). The revised standards focus all aspects of accreditation on Student Learning Outcomes. Efforts to bring structural change in CCC that would meet the revised standards began in 2001 with a number of association and state

sponsored workshops, institutes and training on developing and assessing student learning outcomes to improve teaching and learning. Sessions focused on implementing SLO continue in most venues throughout the state.

Structural changes are occurring in colleges throughout the CCC system such as changes to college mission statements, budgets and program review processes, as well as the creation of staff positions and committees to support, coordinate and monitor activities. The purpose of this multi-site case study is to discover what forces help shape and influence the perceptions of community college administrators and faculty who consider adopting Student Learning Outcomes within the CCC system. The investigation will uncover and describe the forces that influence the perceptions of implementing SLO as to whether they are simply one of compliance to accreditation requirements or are seen as a tool that can improve institutional capacity for increasing student learning.

Statement of the Problem

The literature clearly indicates that how SLO are perceived will determine whether they will be beneficial to students or just be a mechanism to meet accreditation standards. Most faculty share a concern for student success. Without a strong belief that assessing SLO will provide a benefit of increased student success beyond their current practices, what Rogers (2003) calls the *Relative Advantage,* the implementation will be half-hearted, undermined, or abandoned altogether and diffusion stalled (Rogers, 2003; Badway, 2004). Recent studies (Badway, 2005; Badway & Suderman, 2004) report that workshops on developing, assessing, and using SLO to improve student learning helps change perceptions of SLO from a compliance problem to a tool for improving learning. Once faculty and administrators have returned to their campus, however, their perceptions may be influenced by the institutional structures and forces that developed and

reinforced their original fears of losing control over their classrooms and the academic freedom they currently enjoy. Whether the community college practitioners who were convinced of the benefit of SLO at the workshops, continue to believe that there is a Relative Advantage to using SLO once back on their campus is the focus of this study.

Research Questions

When potential SLO adopters perceive a relative advantage over their current practice, adoption is more likely to occur and spread quickly through the institution (Rogers, 2003). Many of the practitioners trained at SLO workshops funded by the CCC system office and conducted in 2004 and 2005 reported an increased perception of *Relative Advantage* from the workshops (Badway, 2005; Badway & Suderman, 2005). There was a concern elicited from faculty attending the regional workshops, however, that once faculty returned to their daily routines at their campus the perception would diminish as they tried to convince fellow faculty members (Badway, 2005). This research will investigate whether faculty and administrators who participated in SLO workshops continued to perceive the benefit of increased student success as a Relative Advantage once back on their campus. Additionally, the research will try to uncover the dominant forces that shape those perceptions.

Significance of the Study

Understanding the forces that change our perceptions of how beneficial some change in our practices in teaching and learning might be is essential to understanding change in education. This study will expand the public discourse on the student learning outcomes initiative. Second, the study will further the research on innovation diffusion in the highly structured and often isomorphic educational setting of community colleges and contribute to our knowledge of the dissemination of effective practices in educational change efforts. The study is timely in that the

SLO initiative is in response to recent changes in accreditation standards. The study may provide

insights to help colleges use the SLO initiative to improve teaching and learning while

demonstrating student learning that meets accreditation requirements.

Definition of Terms

A few terms are important to understand in the context of this study. There are a number

of definitions being bantered around on what a Student Learning Outcome is. The consensus is,

however, that SLO refers to a process of measuring or evaluating how well students master the

objectives of learning situations. Also included in most characterizations are the assessment,

analysis, and improvement those learning experiences. To differentiate those definitions that

would stop at assessment for compliance sake from those that consider SLO to include a

complete cycle of learning, assessment, analysis, revision when appropriate and then back

through the cycle again, Grubb and Badway (2005) coined the term Student Learning Outcomes

Assessment Cycles (SLOAC). Both terms used through this paper refer to SLO as the complete

cycle described by Grubb and Badway.

Another term that may be unfamiliar to many readers but is used frequently by the

practitioners quoted in this study is that of *Flex* days or *Flex* activities. Flex Days were

established at most California Community Colleges in response to a call for staff development in

the 1986 California law AB1725. They are special days in the academic calendar designed

exclusively for professional development activities that are paid for as if they were instructional

hours. The purpose of the Flex program is to provide time for faculty to participate individually

and with groups to achieve improvement in three areas: 1) Staff improvement, 2) Student

improvement, and 3) Instructional improvement (California Code of Regulations, Title 5, Section

55720). These flex days, also known as "flexible time" (California Code of Regulations, Title 5, Section 55720), are defined in Title 5 to be in lieu of instruction.

<center>Methodology</center>

Introduction and rationale for the use of qualitative methods

This study relies on Qualitative methods to understand the forces acting on community college practitioners in the development of perceptions about the SLO initiative during the 2004-2005 and 2005-2006 academic years. Although the study focuses on the forces at work in forming and maintaining perceptions, it is based on the quantitative work of Badway and Suderman (2004) where they measured change in perception in workshop participants using pre- and post-workshop surveys. This research expands on those quantitative findings through dialog with workshop participants after they returned to their campus and had a chance to begin testing their perceptions in the reality of the campus. Patton (2002) suggests that Qualitative methods are different from Quantitative methods, not weaker or softer and that it is now generally accepted that each has its strength. He suggests that the key is to appropriately match methods to purposes, questions and issues and even combine strengths when appropriate.

Specific research design

The issue of whether SLO are perceived as a response to accreditation or a tool to improve teaching and learning in the sometimes contentious atmosphere of the community college was the basis for determining the approach of the study. The study is time bounded using data from the spring 2006 academic term to look retrospectively on the SLO initiative efforts during the 2004-2005 and 2005-2006 academic years across the public system of two-year colleges in California. This exploratory multi-site case study uses interviews, observations from a focus group, a faculty video presentation, and documents specific to program improvement and

program review such as college program review guidelines. If possible, given the short time frame, the study will also include a review of applications for the 2005-2006 and 2006-2007 program improvement funds submitted to the state system office. The review will examine the applications for evidence that the initiative has affected the process in ways that consider student learning.

A multi-site case study analysis, the qualitative approach used in this study, often involves in-depth interviews where the interviewer and interviewee(s) interact in a dialog that explores the essence of the phenomenon (Creswell, 1998). Although the interviews were conducted using structured questions with topics outlined for probes as an "interview guide" (Patton, 2002, p. 343), the questions were used to spark an open-ended dialog that would help generate data within the context of the participants environment. In interviews, the focus/discussion group and informal discussions, practitioners were encouraged to discuss the topic at length. They were encouraged to relate their successes and failures when trying to implement SLO, discuss the barriers, their frustrations, concerns and most importantly what pressures they felt influenced their implementation behaviors once back on the campus.

Respondent Selection Strategies

A purposeful sample was used to inform the research on community college practitioners that has elements of criterion, stratified purposeful, convenience, and eventually opportunistic or chain sampling as outlined by Creswell (1998). The sampling was conveniently chosen from colleagues I currently interact with in my work in committees, regional consortia and advisory boards. The selection of the type of position held by informants was critical in obtaining a diversity of perspectives, so stratified purposeful sampling was employed to include faculty, deans, and researchers. The sampling became opportunistic when one faculty interviewee invited

a colleague, the chair of their program review committee, to join us. All informants were

involved, and all artifacts reviewed came from informants who were involved in the SLO

workshops during the 2004-2005 and 2005-2006 academic years.

Data Collection Procedures

This exploratory study uses interviews, observations from a regional focus group, a

faculty video presentation, and documents specific to program improvement and program

review. All of the interviewees and focus group participants had previously participated in

workshops on developing and implementing SLO.

Interviews.

To assess how the student learning outcomes initiative is being perceived on community

college campuses in the state, interviews with four individuals were conducted. Interviews

ranged from twenty-five to 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 were conducted in person. The vocational dean and researcher were

from two different colleges in the greater Los Angeles area and were conducted via telephone.

Each of the interviews was recorded and transcribed and field notes were taken during the

interview.

Focus group.

The focus group was part of the initiative funded by the CCC system office to investigate

the problems of implementing SLO on campuses and determine what might help facilitate the

use of SLO as tools for improving teaching and learning. The focus group participants 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 academic senate representation

and faculty from a variety of disciplines. The focus group conversation lasted approximately two

hours. Although the focus group conversation was recorded, most of the recording was not useful

due to audio problems. The field notes that were taken, along with a reflective summary

developed by the researcher immediately after the completion of the focus group, were the major

sources of data used in the data analysis.

The faculty video presentation.

The faculty participants in the workshops funded by the system office were offered a

$500 to $1000 stipend, depending on the region, to provide training once back on their campus.

One faculty participant created a video presentation replicating a presentation that was shared

with his departmental faculty. The video presentation was posted on the college website in the

faculty member's personal web area and the link was made available to the researcher. The video

(Gilbert, 2005) consisted of PowerPoint slides and audio around major topics in the workshop.

The audio was transcribed and coded to identify themes in a manner similar to the methodology

used with interviews. The study includes this artifact mainly to add the perspective of a faculty

member not in a leadership position.

Documents.

A number of documents were reviewed during the data analysis. The faculty interviewed

provided the researcher with a draft version of the academic senate for California community

colleges' guide to standards and practices specifically addressing student learning outcomes,

along with the draft of the senate's *College wide student learning expectations and outcomes*

document, the local colleges institute material, the *Student learning outcomes primer*, and the

local college's program review report template.

Local applications for Perkins funds.

Although the researcher intended to use the San Diego region local applications for 2006-2007 that were due in the system office on April 28, 2006, the applications were not available in sufficient time for analysis in this report. It is expected that the eventual review of those applications will provide further insights into whether student learning outcomes assessments were included in the development and consideration of program improvement projects at the colleges. Applications from the prior 2005-2006 academic year were reviewed to specifically identify any references to use of student learning outcomes in the development for funding of program improvement projects.

Data Analysis Procedures

In addition to conducting the interviews and observations, the researcher transcribed each of the recorded sessions manually by listening to a recording and then dictating, sentence by sentence, often phrase by phrase, using the "speech to text" application software provided with the Windows XP operating system. The researcher then corrected the transcriptions by listening to the recording while reading the text of the transcription. Although this sounds like a tedious first step, it provided the researcher with a familiarity with the interview that automated transcription would have been unable to do.

The researcher then prepared a summary for each transcription that included factual information about the interviewee or participants. This procedure provided the researcher with an initial sense of the kinds of answers participants gave to questions in the interview protocol and the relationship of their position to those answers. The verbatim transcriptions were then analyzed with no pre- existing coding scheme to identify themes that may arise within the text of the transcripts. Phrases and sentences were coded to help group forces that might affect

perceptions into a parsimonious set of themes. The analysis was intended to let the participants

voices suggest the influences they perceived and themes for grouping them rather than the

researcher's notions about what those forces affecting perception would be. While 48 separate

codes emerged from the data, only a few themes relevant to this study were identified. Those

themes centered around forces that were due to: 1) external requirements, 2) Social and cultural

environmental messages, and 3) structures influencing SLO perceptions.

Role of the researcher

In my role as researcher, there were some conflicts between research for the purposes of

the study and normal research that I would pursue in the duties of my office. The focus group

discussion session was scheduled as part of the project development to focus the second year of

the project on addressing barriers participants had encountered in the first year of project

implementation. For each of the interviews, however, I began the interview with my explanation

of the intended use of the data collected in this research project. I emphasized that I was acting as

a student and not an official of the state and that all personally identified information provided to

me would be kept confidential. And, that because of the exploratory nature and small sample size

of the study, the findings would only be used to provide fodder for future research.

Researcher Bias

Although I attempted to code the text neutrally, my choice of codes and themes was no

doubt influenced by my past experience in accountability system development and most

particularly by my research and development of program improvement projects funded and

implemented statewide in the community college system including the current student learning

outcomes initiative. More importantly, my belief that faculty and staff who interact directly with

students impact student learning the most and my desire to have success more broadly

experienced by students in the community college system guided my direction of over a million

dollars into the student learning outcomes initiatives project. These beliefs and the commitment

of funding definitely makes me want to see the results lean in the direction of improving student

success. That bias however was balanced by the desire to protect the academic freedom and limit

the impact of accrediting mandates on faculty workload. My beliefs in the integrity of faculty

and administrators in pursuing a shared interest and concern for student success undoubtedly

affected my perceptions in both the development of this research project and the analysis of the

data collected.

Assumptions

Most of the basic assumptions that had to be considered in this project were assumptions

founded on trust and openness. I believe that the longstanding relationship between the

informants and the researcher provided for levels of trust that would allow honest and open

answers. I often receive telephone calls from these informants and others where inside

information about college operations, and activities they are aware of within my office, is shared

with the full knowledge that it is for my understanding only. Additionally, information provided

during the focus group conversation and dialogue was assumed by both informants and

facilitators to be the foundation for the development of future projects funded through the system

office.

Limitations

Because of the limited selection of informants, this study can be considered exploratory

only. Although it provides the different perspectives of informants in various positions within the

community college system, it does not include the diversity of perspectives within those

positions or a sufficient sampling of perspectives across the 110 community colleges within the

California system of public two year colleges to provide a substantial saturation of perspectives. Additionally, the local applications for the 2006-2007 academic year were not available as of the date of this report. The determination of funding for program improvements, specifically those that might include student learning outcomes, that may have been evidenced within them will need to be reported in future reports.

Summary

This exploratory multi-site case study provides only the foundation for future research. It can provide insights into the forces influencing perceptions for only a few selected informants. Determining the possible forces influencing whether student learning outcomes are perceived as a tool for reaching compliance or a tool for improving teaching and learning that might affect student success can only be viewed as an image clouded by fog in the findings suggested by this study.

Findings

Description, Analysis, Interpretation of Data

Although all the informants in the study work in a community college, each held a different position within a college and had diverse perspectives on the student learning outcomes initiative. There were a number of common themes that emerged from the data albeit from different views of the initiative. Three perspectives became evident: 1) college administration or administrators; 2) faculty in leadership positions; and 3) faculty in teaching positions. But, from each of these perspectives a common set of forces affecting faculty perception of the student learning outcome initiative emerged.

External requirements.

Accrediting bodies outside the college were cited as the impetus for pursuing knowledge about the student learning outcomes initiative by most of the informants. 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. Where the difference in perspectives and perceptions of the SLO initiative existed, the source of the information appeared to have a tremendous impact. For example, the researcher interviewed recalled working on student learning outcomes as early as the late nineteen eighties when the California research association for community colleges studied the accreditation process. He related that "without accreditation standards that included a focus on student learning," a major criticism of the study, "other concerns on his campus took the place of the local initiative that we had started." Even with the new standards focusing on SLO, he was concerned about how meaningful change could occur in the college given the reluctance of accrediting teams to enforce the standards:

> The folks on [accreditation] teams are being told to just look for dialogue. That isn't even a plan. They're taking a very gradual approach. I just don't know how much continued pressure from the U.S. Department of Education and from the Congress will come our way. I think we need to do much more than our regional group is doing on this topic. (Male institutional researcher)

The dean interviewed had a different experience in her development of both perceptions of the pressures from WASC and the perception of SLO implementation as one of compliance or learning. She relates first learning about them through close colleagues from the system office and the chief instructional officers association in her story as:

> I had heard this from … and … at the fall CCCAOE conference and CIO forum in 2002. This is really a way of getting ready for accreditation with the low underlying theme of

being better for students. We say it's better for students a lot but I don't think it would be

happening if that was the only motivation. (Female dean inteviewed)

The faculty leaders interviewed, a male academic planning committee chair and computer

information system faculty member and the female biology instructor and curriculum committee

chair who he asked to join us (without informing the researcher), stated it somewhat more

precisely with their conversational teamed responses:

Male chair: "I think the existence of the new standards has accelerated the process."

Female chair: "We have a deadline and we need to be together soon to meet that

deadline."

Male chair: "It provides that impetus that we may not have had."

Female chair: "It's sort of like taxes. You just do it."

The review of the video developed by a regular faculty participant (i.e., not in a

leadership position such as department chair, faculty senate, etc.) in one of the early workshops

uncovered a more skeptical view of the need for developing and implementing SLO:

…and that because they're [SLO] coming to our area, that it's going to behoove us as

faculty members to kind of get in the driver's seat. In other words, if we don't embrace

student learning outcomes, the administrators in Sacramento and Washington, for

heaven's sake, will embrace them for us and will hand us down student learning

outcomes for each of our courses. I don't know if that's true or not but that was the basic

premise.

The overall idea of the whole conference was this idea that the student learning

outcomes assessment cycle can actually be a mechanism for improving our programs

rather than just some burden that's imposed on us from the outside. (Gilbert, 2005)

The venues for learning about SLOs generally varied depending on the position held by focus group 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 in the focus group reported awareness particularly from the statewide academic senate institutes as concerns about the WASC imposition of SLOs in accreditation.

Campus venues for awareness of the WASC standards among faculty were reported as local senate meetings, national discipline conferences and departmental meetings. Generally, many faculty in the focus group reported being previously unaware of student learning outcomes or more specifically the language used to talk about them. The academic planning committee chair interviewed quantified the awareness on his campus with:

I believe that 75 percent of faculty recognize the importance of student learning outcomes. They are aware of them but they haven't done and they don't know how to do them. And, they may have some anxiety about it. Partially that is driven by the new accreditation standards. Our last self study was an extraordinary experience. It was truly a self study. It was a very open process. At one of the convocations in beginning of the accreditation self study process, I asked faculty who had not been through accreditation to please stand up. Over half the faculty rose to their feet. Probably 60 percent had never been through accreditation. When we put the teams together, a lot of those people were coming at it with very fresh eyes. It was not something they have a lot of experience

with. I also don't think we're atypical. (Male academic planning committee chair and

computer information system faculty member)

Social and cultural environmental messages.

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. The biology instructor and curriculum chair at a northern California

college, restated the concern in her interview:

> I heard about student learning outcomes quite some time ago because I'm interested in
>
> educational research and knew about the idea. At first I was quite upset because, to some
>
> extent the way student learning outcomes were being imposed, they acted as if we had
>
> never heard of any of it or done any of that. It felt so condescending for them to tell us
>
> about something that we were clearly so way behind on. And yet, those of us interested in
>
> educational research and theory and its application knew about these ideas long ago and
>
> had been using them for many years… 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. (Female biology instructor and curriculum chair)

Administrators reported first hearing of the SLOs in reference to the changing

accreditation standards in early 2002 at annual conferences as the WASC standards were being

developed. The vocational dean interviewed 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 a professional association conference, 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. (Female dean interviewed)

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 after the focus group, 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.

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 interviewees and nearly all of the college teams in the focus group discussions brought up the

hostile environment on campus around implementing SLO.

> Additionally, a team went last January to the HEERG session where we got really fired
>
> up and got some really great ideas but when we came back to campus and tried to share
>
> those ideas we were told to stand down by the local academic senate leadership and a
>
> couple of spineless administrators.

Two faculty and three managers went but they were not able to share any of the information because the curriculum chair, who was also in the academic senate, was unwilling to listen. The academic faculty are picking this up though and proceeding smoothly: except that it's divisive since no one else is allowed to speak on the topic, which is a side issue but it creates an atmosphere of lethargy among those who are not at the leadership level. (Female dean interviewed)

Now some of the people, as I said, in the [faculty] senate have never let go of any of the evolutionary processes, they're still back there and they never let it go, that confrontational position to student learning outcomes that the academic senate first responded to the WASC requirements with. (Male academic planning committee chair and computer information system faculty member)

One of the faculty leaders interviewed saw the hesitancy to implement from a different perspective as she explained:

Some people see it as a compliance issue and in particular, I think there's two groups that see it as a compliance issue: people who are not interested at all and don't want to deal with it and people like myself actually, in some ways, who have been doing this for years and understand the value of it deeply but now have to in addition comply with the documenting of what we were already doing. It's not to disparage the first group that doesn't care, they think it's not valuable. I think it's tremendously valuable. It's just that I've already worked through that part. (Female biology instructor and curriculum chair)

The researcher interviewed described a less overt resistance with:

I have not really heard of anyone on our campus in an outspoken way oppose it. It's more

of a passive resistance of ignore it and it will go away. There are faculty leaders who

have picked it up, sometimes stimulated by experience with the assessment institute

workshops or discussion on campus but other times just interested in the topic. (Male

researcher interviewed)

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 SLO as a tool to improve teaching and learning. 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. The faculty leader interviewed described the

process on his campus as:

We have a place called Castle and Castle stands for center for advancement of student

and staff learning. The castle has become kind of the home for this. One of the difficulties

that we are encountering right now is that in order to be able to do this you have to have a

structure. You've got to be able to push the process through. We're gonna find that

structure in program review. Other institutions have assessment committees or

assessment coordinators.

Department meetings are where it's probably going to happen eventually. It's a

problem when the department is very small or the department includes a number of

disciplines. When they're small the work's intimidating. (Male academic planning

committee chair and computer information system faculty member)

Structures influencing SLO perceptions.

A number of structural components within colleges were described that act as pressures

on implementation and how the different actors perceive SLO implementation. 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 SLO that was being shared with faculty going through either

the curriculum approval process or program review. The current program review template

provided by the two faculty leaders included: 1) a section dedicated to program SLO including

their alignment to courses, assessment, and analysis and evaluation; 2) a section that included the

status of course SLO, the assessment process and an analysis of their effectiveness; and 3) the

planning section included program SLO planning implications such as assessment process

changes and outcome revisions and modifications. These components are clearly focused on

teaching and learning.

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 what types of acceptance or resistance to SLOs were on his campus, one

faculty leader 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." (Male academic planning committee chair and computer information
>
> system faculty member)

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 during the focus group that when bringing up some new ideas about integrating SLO

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 J… 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 focus group 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 leader interviewed mentioned this conflict and also added an additional anxiety over what could be an unanticipated consequence of SLO implementation at his 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. (Male academic planning committee chair and computer information system faculty member)

There were a number of other anxieties and concerns mentioned in the discussions ranging from use of SLO in faculty evaluations to the continuing concerns over imposition of standards in the classroom and the use of valuable time for a compliance activity as the previously cited female faculty leader put it with her "…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." Others identified the

workload as a problem with statements like:

> …the process called norming. You've probably heard of this but I've never heard of it
>
> before. And for this to happen, what you have to do is you have to record the results of
>
> the assessment. In other words, you not only have to fill out the rubric chart but then
>
> record the results. And then you share them with all the other instructors teaching this
>
> section. And that of course may be a problem. Finally somebody has to analyze those….
>
> for SLOAC, the results have to be collected and compared. We have to do that in several
>
> different places. They want us to do it at the course level, so all CS 111 courses
>
> instructors are going to keep records from their course rubrics. Those are going to be
>
> added up by somebody. Collected by somebody and then merged into the program and
>
> college level. Then again in the paper that I handed out for this talk, there were examples
>
> of doing this on page eight and nine. From my point of view the question is who's going
>
> to do this and how. Right now we have a large organization that's responsible for keeping
>
> one piece of course of information and that's grades. How large an organization are we
>
> going to need to collect hundreds of pieces of information is not really clear to me at all.
>
> (Gilbert, 2005)

About three years ago we changed the course outline of record to be more like the

recommended one the state senate had been talking about, the one Bill Scroggins wrote

about in the mid ninety's, we call it an integrated course outline but it's more narrative

than the check boxes we had. It gives the faculty the opportunity to think about the

relationships between intended outcomes and assignments you made or activities you do

in the class and the criteria by which you evaluate the effectiveness of the learning. Lots

of faculty are grumbling about the fact that they have to type out sentences and think

about this. But by the time the accrediting group comes almost all of the outlines should

have at least been through that cycle.

There may be a lot of this informal stuff going on and people just don't write up a

document what they're doing. I can't help but think that someone in the classroom that

has a bad experience with students, where things didn't go quite as well as they hoped,

they would not take a moment or two to reflect on what's going on - What we might do

differently - but might not bother to write down the process or what they did do

differently. That's a different matter but if they would, La La, you have got evidence.

(Male researcher interviewed)

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 SLO. In all of the discussions, however,

participants recognized that awareness of SLO was growing on their campuses. One faculty

member interviewed, as previously cited, 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 SLO were now part of the accreditation process. At another college

successful implementation of SLO as a tool for improving teaching and learning was evident in

their focus group comments:

At … 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.

(Focus group participant)

Discussion

This study illuminated two clearly defined cultures within California's community

college system that react differently to change: the culture shared by those in administrative

ranks and the culture shared by faculty. These cultures reacted differently to the three forces

effecting change identified in the study 1) external requirements, 2) social and cultural

environment messages, and 3) structural influences. The bridge between the two cultures, faculty

in leadership positions who must negotiate administrative demands with maintaining their beliefs

as faculty, are key players in educational reform as they balance their efforts to keep those forces

from overwhelmingly influencing their actions.

The faculty culture, somewhat isolated from the hierarchy of administration and

mandated regulatory change, was found to be greatly influenced by social and cultural messages

that occur within the culture while unaware of the details of regulatory pressures. Even between

disciplines, there was a sense of cultural difference related to SLO reported by faculty leaders in

the study with statements like:

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 sciences.

Those disciplines are used to measuring things anyway. The whole process does not

intimidate them much. (Male academic planning committee chair and computer

information system faculty member)

DiMaggio & Powell (1983) describe this force as a normative process that results primarily from

professionalization where through a filtering process in hiring, where members have the same

credentials, backgrounds, and orientations exerts pressure to conform to the group norms. When

such similar characteristics exist, members tend to see problems, policies, procedures, and

structures in similar ways. The socialization pressure was illuminated in the study with

statements like those of senior faculty to ideas of a new faculty member "you're new, you'll get

over it" (Female faculty focus group participant).

Although faculty operate within a structure maintained by the institution, their

perceptions of proposed changes is heavily influenced by the communications from those in

faculty leadership positions such as the faculty leadership on campus and the statewide academic

senate. Most of the knowledge about SLO and accreditation flowed through those highly

influencing communication channels. Numerous informants reported the different perspectives

of influencing groups and the different message content that flowed through those groups.

The college administrators on the other hand, were found to be influenced more by

external requirements such as accreditation requirements, budget constraints, and reporting

requirements. In the highly structured hierarchy of college administration, adapting to regulation

appeared to be a matter of fact type of acceptance. Even faculty leaders such as the study's

faculty committee chairs were not only aware of the regulatory changes but had accepted them as

clearly stated with "It's sort of like taxes: you just do it" (Female faculty leader and curriculum

committee chair).

When faculty leaders were convinced of the benefit to implementing SLO, they were not only able to convince other faculty but were in postitions to alter the formal structures that faculty must deal with. The female faculty curriculum chair exemplified this example with her statement:

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. Here's the format, here's the instructions, and here's a primer. (Female biology instructor and curriculum chair)

The results of this study support DiMaggio & Powell's (1983) discussion of isomorphism as a constraining process that forces one unit in a population to resemble other units that face the same set of environmental conditions. The study provides insights into how the different forces affect or resist change among those facing similar environmental pressures. The study also supports Rogers (2003) proposition of the importance of the perception of relative advantage. Without the belief that students would learn more and be more successful in courses, there was little benefit cited beyond compliance with accreditation requirements. Whether the participants in the SLO workshops were first led to believe that there was a benefit that would result from implementing SLO and then that perception of the relative advantage persisted amid the normative pressures experienced by faculty back on their campus makes a critical difference in whether the adoption and implementation of SLO will result in greater student success or simply be another form of compliance to accreditation requirements.

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