

Standard 2: Achieving Educational Objectives Through Core Functions

Reflective Essay 2a: The Learning-Centered University

Introduction

This essay describes our progress in building capacity for examining student learning in both the General Education program and in the major. We also describe the activities provided by the Center for Teaching and Learning, since a discussion of improving student learning would not be complete without detailing our capacity for faculty development.

Student Learning Outcomes: Progress in the General Education Program [CFRs: 2.1, 2.2, 2.4 & Q8, 4.1]

Our [General Education \(GE\)](#) program must conform to Title V in the state of California Education Code, which describes the general education requirements for students completing a bachelor's degree at a [CSU campus](#). Students must complete at least 48 semester units of GE courses, including 9 units at the upper division level. In addition, the breadth requirement specifies that students must complete these units in the following areas: communication and critical thinking, natural sciences and quantitative reasoning, social and behavioral sciences, and humanities. At SDSU, students can select from over 400 courses to complete GE requirements. Thus, although all students fulfill the mandated breadth requirements, the path to meet this requirement can vary dramatically depending on student choice of course work. While this "cafeteria-like" program allows students great flexibility in course offerings, it can create challenges to examining student learning at the program level. This section describes the progress we have made and the policies and procedures we have put in place to increase our capacity to examine student learning in the GE program.

The first step in assessing student learning requires defining student learning goals and objectives that describe the knowledge, skills, and abilities we wish graduates to acquire as a result of completing the GE program. Multiple stakeholders, including faculty and students, were involved in conversations about desired goals for the GE program. For example, in 1997, students in 13 GE courses responded to a [survey](#) that asked about their satisfaction with the current goals and objectives as well as their perception that they were meeting these goals. Results of the survey indicated that the majority of students (over 75%) were satisfied with their experience in the GE course in which they were enrolled. Faculty discussions that included examining the results of the student survey as well as philosophical discussions of the role of GE in student learning led to a review and revision of goals and objectives. These initial efforts were published in the SDSU Curriculum Guide and used in the curricular review process to ensure that new courses were aligned with the stated learning goals.

In an effort to continue to make progress in student learning assessment in the GE program, a [task force](#) was formed in 2000 to develop a comprehensive plan to examine all course syllabi for alignment with the overall goals and objectives. A four-year [schedule](#) was developed in which [clusters of faculty](#) would create scoring rubrics to be used to assess whether course syllabi indicated appropriate student learning goals and objectives. [Upon completion](#) of this task we would have a clear understanding of which objectives were being measured in which GE courses so that we could create a plan for directly assessing student learning in the entire GE program. In addition, a workshop [see [letter](#) and [schedule](#)] that focused on strategies for assessing student learning was conducted in February 2001. However, when faculty groups met, the discussions moved toward a desire to [expand the set of learning goals and objectives](#) to a much larger set for each category of the GE program. This change led to the development of 28 additional goals and

95 additional objectives. The most recent [SDSU Curriculum Guide](#) contains this comprehensive list of goals and objectives. Faculty who propose new GE courses must describe in detail which learning goals and objectives are a part of the proposed course and how they will be measured.

It is clear that the current list of learning goals and objectives is now so broad as to make it virtually impossible to create a meaningful, manageable, and sustainable assessment of student learning. This situation prompted the Dean of Undergraduate Studies to appoint a GE Assessment Task Force in September 2003 to develop operating guidelines for directly measuring student learning. The committee met throughout the fall semester and completed its recommendations in December 2003. These [recommendations](#) were approved by Undergraduate Council and will be implemented in fall 2004. Essentially, we will use an embedded assessment approach to obtain direct measures of student learning. Each semester, faculty will jointly develop an assignment or project to be used across multiple sections of GE courses. A random sample of student work will be collected and evaluated by a scoring rubric, also agreed upon by the faculty. To ensure that the loop of assessment is completed, the results of the assessment project will be shared with the faculty so that curricular changes can be made where necessary. By employing this process we will create an ongoing cycle of examining student learning in the GE program. Adjustments to this plan will also be made as we learn from our successes and setbacks.

The GE Assessment Task Force suggested two other very important recommendations that add to our capacity to examine student learning. First, the GE Committee was [directed](#) to re-think the usefulness of the comprehensive list of goals and objectives that currently exist and to create a list of fewer than 10 goals that clearly define the knowledge, skills, and abilities we wish graduates to attain as a result of their GE education. The greatest challenge to this task is that for some departments the FTE generated by GE courses drives their ability to offer small undergraduate and graduate major courses. This leads to the belief that “letting go” of some of the goals and objectives might threaten the ability to offer some classes. Given the current budget crisis, this view is understandable to some extent; however, it challenges our ability to come to consensus on what is most important for student learning. Therefore, we need to engage faculty in a discussion centered on what we want students to know and be able to do as a result of their GE experiences. This is an important and formidable task that we will engage in during AY 2004-05.

Second, the University Committee on Assessment (UCA), which oversees assessment efforts for the campus, used to be a subcommittee of Academic Policy and Planning (AP&P). In this structure the committee was somewhat invisible to the campus community. Therefore, in spring 2004 this committee, re-named the “[Student Learning Outcomes Committee](#)” was re-positioned to become a free standing Senate committee with broad campus involvement and clearly defined functions. The Committee will also make annual reports to the University Senate on campus progress in student learning assessment. Committee members will be appointed by the Senate and the Student Learning Outcomes Committee will begin functioning in fall 2004.

Student Learning Outcomes: Progress in Programs/Departments [CFRs: 2.1, 2.2, 2.4 & Q1, 4.1]

The aforementioned University Committee on Assessment (UCA), established in 1989, has been charged with assisting the campus in examining student learning. Until the late 1990s, committee progress was slow due to a perceived lack of support from upper administration. Since her arrival in 1998, Provost Marlin has supported a much stronger emphasis on student learning outcomes assessment, which has enhanced our ability to make progress. In addition, the position of Associate Dean of Undergraduate Studies, which included chairing the UCA, was only half-time. Since August 2002, this has been a full-time position. This section describes the changes we have made to build our capacity for assessing student learning in programs and departments.

In 1998 the UCA developed an audit [survey](#) of student learning assessment practices that was distributed to all departments. Results of this survey indicated that about 50% of responding departments had developed learning goals, but they were generally very broad in nature. Little systematic assessment of learning was taking place other than the use of indirect measures such as surveys of graduates, alumni, or employers and most departments believed that the use of grades was sufficient to examine student learning. This information was used by the UCA to assemble a plan to educate the campus about student learning and provide resources for faculty development in this area. First, a [website](#) was developed that provides information about best practices in assessment, library and internet resources, and campus resources. In addition, a "[Departmental Guide to Student Learning Assessment](#)" was produced in 2002 and available to download. During spring 2004 a [scoring rubric](#) was also developed by UCA to review assessment plans and provide feedback to departments/programs regarding their progress.

Three campus workshops on student learning assessment have also been held. The first was conducted by Mary Senter, from Western Michigan, in spring 1998. Her 2-day workshop focused on how to begin to develop assessment at the program level and engage in discussions about student learning. This workshop was followed by a visit from Dr. Lion Gardiner from Rutgers University, who conducted a 2-day workshop in 1999. He extended our understanding by focusing on the development of meaningful learning goals and objectives. In addition, he worked with faculty from eight departments (Anthropology, Biology, Child and Family Development, Economics, Geography, Recreation, Parks and Tourism, Psychology, and Sociology) who received assigned time to work with faculty in their respective departments to develop a student learning assessment plan. The third workshop focused on strategies for assessment of student learning in General Education.

While offering workshops can impact faculty who attend such events, campus-wide impact is more likely to occur with changes to policy. In 1999, a discussion of a program/department's progress in student learning assessment became part of the Academic Review process that all departments undergo every 7-9 years. Departments are to submit their assessment plans to the UCA for review and feedback prior to undergoing their Academic Review. The annual Academic Plan initiated by the Provost now also includes a section on student learning assessment. Most recently, the procedures that departments must follow for the Academic Plans and Academic Reviews have been aligned to make them more efficient for departments to complete, but also to foreground student learning. A detailed discussion of the evolution of these changes can be found in Essay 4a for Standard 4.

In May 2003, a follow-up survey [See [letter](#) and [survey](#)] to the 1998 audit was conducted to examine our campus progress. The survey, sent to 64 departments, schools, or programs, elicited an 88% response rate. [Findings](#) indicated that 85% of reporting departments have developed undergraduate learning goals and objectives. Assessment methods vary across departments with 40% - 58% of departments employing surveys. Eighteen departments have developed capstone courses and 11 departments use student portfolios. The most extensively developed portfolio, in existence as a requirement for students since 1992, can be found in the [Liberal Studies Program](#). The most critical finding of the survey was the virtual lack of direct measures of student learning at the program level in General Education. As a result, the Dean of Undergraduate Studies created a task force to develop operating procedures for assessment of student learning in General Education, described in an earlier section of this essay.

In fall 2003, a [follow-up](#) to this survey was conducted by asking departments that indicated they had developed learning goals and objectives to send their documents to the Division of Undergraduate Studies. A review by the UCA found a wide variation in completeness of materials. The College of Business Administration, College of Education, College of Engineering,

and College of Health and Human Services have made the most progress since many of the departments/programs residing in these colleges must also submit self-studies to outside accrediting bodies, which have shifted their emphasis to student learning. In addition, while many departments have clearly defined learning goals and objectives, there is much to be done to develop meaningful assessments for these goals. These findings led the Dean of Undergraduate Studies to engage in conversations with the Provost regarding changes to the Academic Plan for spring 2004. The Provost subsequently sent a [letter](#) to all department/program chairs that asked for the following information for all undergraduate and graduate programs to be submitted by April 16, 2004: mission statement, learning goals, learning outcomes/ objectives, proposed measures of their outcomes, and a timeline for assessment. We received [plans](#) from approximately 92% of departments/programs. Two members of the UCA reviewed each plan using a [scoring rubric](#) and letters were written to each department/program providing feedback on their progress. [Best practices](#) web pages were posted to the Assessment website to serve as examples for departments and as a way to make our assessment work more public. In addition, each department/program selected either October 15 or April 1 as their [annual reporting date](#) for describing their progress in student learning assessment for the previous academic year, a reporting procedure that will begin during the 2004-05 academic year. In addition, beginning in fall 2004, course [syllabi](#) must include student learning outcomes. Finally, the Center for Teaching and Learning, which will be described in the next section, has also recently focused attention on student learning.

Center for Teaching and Learning (CTL) [CFRs: 3.4, 4.7; Standard 2 Q6]

The [Center for Teaching and Learning](#) became a reality in 1999, with the appointment of a half-time Director and a full time administrative coordinator. During the first year of operation, the Director developed operating guidelines that described how the Center would support faculty development in teaching and learning. These services included providing individual assistance to faculty who wished to improve their teaching, workshops on a variety of pedagogical topics, monthly faculty lunches aimed at faculty in their first and second years at SDSU, and travel support for system wide workshops conducted by [CSU Institute for Teaching and Learning](#) (ITL). CTL also organized one day of the New Faculty Orientation held each fall. In addition, nine faculty members, one from each of the colleges and the Imperial Valley Campus, were selected as faculty fellows, with the responsibility of serving as “master teachers” for their colleagues.

During AY 2000-01 energies were directed toward developing a CTL website and acquiring books to build a CTL library, along with continuing the same activities as the previous year. Workshops were co-sponsored with [Instructional Technology Services](#) on use of [Blackboard](#) and how to conduct assessment of student learning in General Education. Lecturers, including part time and full time, received faculty development support for the first time with the creation of a Lecturer Associate whose responsibilities included providing an orientation to the campus and presenting workshops on teaching and learning. In addition, one-time lottery funds were used for Scholarship of Teaching grants and Curriculum Transformation Grants. This progress was challenged during AY 2002-03 when the director retired. We were fortunate when two faculty members stepped forward to work on an interim basis until a new director was hired. Two national searches to fill the Director position as a full-time position were conducted in spring 2002 and fall 2002 but both were unsuccessful. Therefore, an internal search was conducted during spring 2003 and we successfully appointed a faculty member in July 2003. His position is 75% during the academic year and 50% during the summer.

The new Director faces the challenge of creating strategies that increase the visibility and effectiveness of CTL services under a constrained budget. With a 50% decrease in the budget for operating expenses, the faculty fellows program, Lecturer Associate, and money to support faculty travel to teaching and learning conferences have been eliminated. This situation is

certainly not ideal, resulting in limited support for new faculty primarily through an orientation workshop and monthly lunches on teaching and learning strategies. The Director has focused his energies toward using technology to make resources more readily available to faculty members and on aligning CTL support activities with other efforts to promote use of student learning outcomes, student-centered learning, and continuous improvement. For example, recent workshops on writing learning outcomes were presented in smart classrooms where participant responses were immediately projected onto screens to encourage a deeper discussion. The [workshop](#) is also available on the CTL website so that faculty who could not attend the workshop can still benefit from the materials. Finally, the CTL Director is working to improve coordination with other faculty support services on campus including [Instructional Technology Services](#), which provides Baseline Access, Training, and Support (BATS), [Blackboard](#) support, and operates a [faculty room](#) that supports both teaching and professional growth activities to ensure the broadest campus reach within our limited resources. [See [CTL summary](#)].

Summary

We have made significant progress in building capacity for assessing student learning in both the General Education program and our majors, particularly since the arrival of a new Dean of Undergraduate Studies in 2002. Policies, procedures, and structures are in place that will facilitate our ability to examine student learning, thus indicating that our campus culture is beginning to change. Discussions of student learning have been a part of meetings of the Undergraduate Council, the General Education Committee, the Academic Planning and Policy Committee, the Senate Executive Committee, and the University Senate. Without these conversations, the policy changes described in this essay could not have taken place. The Dean has also formed strong partnerships with other college deans in Academic Affairs, some who had already begun developing the capacity to examine student learning in their respective colleges. Finally, the Dean of Undergraduate Studies and the Dean of Students, who also arrived in 2002, have been working closely to create a stronger collaborative relationship between Academic Affairs and Student Affairs. However, the very recent departure (May 28, 2004) of the Dean of Students presents a challenge to the progress we have made in developing a shared understanding of student learning in Academic Affairs and Student Affairs. Yet, a cadre of administrators and faculty members remain who are working hard to develop a “culture of inquiry” at SDSU where student learning is examined both inside and outside of the classroom.

Our progress in the area of student learning assessment and faculty development must be tempered, however, with the recognition that sustaining these efforts requires a continual commitment of institutional support. Assessment of student learning at the program level using direct measures represents a paradigm shift for most faculty. The process is time consuming, messy, and ongoing. Faculty development support through CTL is currently done on an individual, and in some cases, department basis because of a constrained operating budget. Funding limitations currently challenge our ability to plan and implement more systemic approaches that assist faculty to design and manage courses and programs to promote more effective learning.