

## SLO Assessment at Mesa College: Where We Are Now

2009-10 puts us into a new phase with the development and assessment of our student learning outcomes: this FAQ gives some information about where we've been and where we're going.

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### **What's new in SLO Assessment at Mesa this year?**

The most obvious difference is the rollout of Taskstream, our new SLO software system. Training for the entire campus community began in September with a general overview of the system, and continued with more practical, "hands-on" sessions the following week; it will continue, as needed, all year. The more people know this system, the easier it will become to use: there's more about Taskstream, how we got it, and who might use it in a later note.

Another difference is that the SLO committee will be more "hands-on" this year, helping departments, disciplines and programs collect and record evidence of student learning. Finally, although questions about SLOs have been part of Program Review materials for some years, their documentation and the results of their assessment now comprise a slightly more prominent section: they thus assume their place as part (but only a part) of any program's plans to maintain quality.

### **Can we back up? What exactly is "Assessment"? Doesn't it refer to placement tests?**

Yes, it can, and that's an unfortunate confusion. Assessment for placement usually involves standardized tests, the results of which place students in the proper course in a sequence, usually in English, Math, or ESOL.

SLO Assessment is different: it's learning assessment, specifically, the assessment of the SLOs that each program (instructional, student service or administrative unit) has adopted. Here's the current California Academic Senate definition: "Learning Assessment is a process where methods are used by a faculty member, department, program or institution to generate and collect data for evaluation of processes, courses, and programs with the ultimate purpose of evaluating overall educational quality and improving student learning. This term refers to any method used to gather evidence and evaluate quality and may include both quantitative and qualitative data."

There's a lot to unpack in that definition, so let's try. The first step is to have learning outcomes to assess, and all instructional departments and disciplines at Mesa, along with all student service areas and administrative units, have adopted some. Generating and adopting these SLOs has been a very big deal: they reflect our individual senses of what's important in our programs, and what we want our students to achieve as a result of taking our classes or using our services. Now we have to determine how well our students are actually achieving those outcomes. Here are a few things to keep in mind:

***Faculty and staff members can use any method they think is useful to measure that achievement.*** Instructional faculty can use already established assignments – quizzes, tests, essays, oral reports, lab reports, portfolios, embedded exam questions – or short “classroom assessment techniques” (CATs), flexible tools that provide rapid feedback on some aspect of student learning. Student service personnel might rely more on “indirect” assessment (student surveys filled out after point-of-service appointments) but can also use “direct” assessment (for example, the generation of realistic and achievable educational plans).

***The method you choose depends on the outcome you're assessing.*** Different outcomes will usually require different activities or assignments, although there's no reason why the same activity or assignment can't be used to assess more than one outcome at a time. The nature of the assessment assignments will obviously affect the assessment results, so the process by which they're chosen deserves some thought.

***We should try to collect evidence of all sorts of learning,*** not only rote knowledge or abilities, but values, attitudes and habits of mind. Indeed, the reason “critical thinking” shows up in so many departmental SLOs is that multi-dimensional, integrated thinking skills (the upper levels of Bloom's taxonomy) are important – not only in classrooms, but in what comes after college. The key is to choose assessments that can measure them.

*Student performance can be assessed either quantitatively or qualitatively*, through numbers or statistical values on scoring rubrics or with descriptive information in the form of a narrative or comment. Each form of assessment has advantages and disadvantages: the best, most thorough assessments would include both. Similarly, collecting both direct and indirect “artifacts” (student work and student reports about their work) would be ideal.

Finally, as assessments of SLOs become part of a normal semester’s work, attempts to improve teaching and learning through them (innovation, risk-taking) should be recognized and honored.

### **What’s the big deal? Haven’t we always assessed learning by giving grades?**

SLOs are *not* grades; grades are *not* SLO assessment. The differences are important. For one thing, grades are based on student performance over the semester, and largely have to do with knowledge of subject matter, the course objectives on Curricunet course outlines. But outcomes aren’t objectives; they represent what our students know or will be able to do in different venues *outside* the classroom (in the workplace, for example) as a result of having taken the class. As a result, they’re more general than the specific course objectives, and are often expressed in terms like “critical thinking” or “global awareness.” As the Academic Senate Glossary says, “the overarching Student Learning Outcomes . . . synthesize, evaluate and analyze many of the [more discrete and more numerous] objectives.”

Grades, by their nature, are final: in assessment language, that’s called “summative assessment.” But SLO assessments – given, as they are, at different points of the semester – have the potential to be “formative,” evaluations that might help the students improve their final grades, or even their performance on the next assignment. The best assessments should be learning opportunities, for both teachers and students. Also, after grades have been issued, they represent the past, as in “I’m a C student”: by contrast, SLOs represent the future.

Finally, SLO assessment is measured through rubrics, not letter grades: they can be similar – a student who gets an “A” on an oral report that’s also being assessed for evidence of critical thinking will probably get a high assessment on critical thinking as well – but they’re not identical.

### **OK, I’ve conducted my assessment; now what?**

Once the assessment is conducted and the results recorded, they have to be copied and pasted onto the various workspaces of Taskstream. The results from each section of a heavily-enrolled course will then be aggregated into the overall results for that course and will be available for department or program review.

The most important thing instructional faculty need to do, as soon as possible, is to decide who exactly is going to do assessments this year and who will record the results. Right now, all contract faculty and all adjuncts have full “view and edit” permissions on Taskstream – that means that anyone doing outcomes assessment will be able to enter the results into the system. Ideally, that’s great, as we want this work to be as widely distributed as possible; the alternative is to grant full edit privileges only to one or two people per department or discipline – perhaps the chair, perhaps the lead writer for Program Review. That’s what student services and administrative services have decided to do this year, but it does create more work for those one or two people. Dean Bergland’s office might also be able to help with basic data input.

**You’ve mentioned rubrics several times. I have my own scoring rubric that I’ve used for years: can I use that to assess SLOs?**

SLOs have to be assessed with common rubrics. People teaching different sections of the same course might choose different student “artifacts” to assess (exams, quizzes, portfolios, etc.), but need to be using common departmental criteria and standards to assess them. So you need to agree on two things: the criteria you’re measuring (the far left column of the rubric) and the standards you’re measuring them by (the top row). Everything else is up to you. Here’s an example from my department:

**Rubric for Assessing Critical Thinking in English 49:**  
 “Upon completion of English 49, students will be able to . . .”

<b>Criteria</b>	<b>Sophisticated</b>	<b>Competent</b>	<b>Emergent</b>	<b>Beginning</b>
Analyze and evaluate a reading assignment’s argument				
Define the purpose and audience for their own writing				
Construct effective arguments in response to assigned reading				

Some important things about this (or any) rubric:

--- Here, there are words across the top for the various levels of attainment, not numbers: this was obviously constructed by English professors! But, of course, you could use the numbers 1-4, or you could use three columns instead of four, labeling them, perhaps, “Exceeds Standards,” “Meets Standards,” and “Doesn’t Meet Standards.” But however you construct your rubric, everyone assessing the same course has to be using the same one.

--- *Those common criteria are our “course outcomes.”* That is, “Critical Thinking” is one of our overall department outcomes, but the left-hand column is what Critical Thinking means in the context of this particular course. In fact, every department or service unit at Mesa that has “Critical Thinking” as an outcome will have to figure out what it means for their different programs and courses: what gets assessed are those definitions.

--- There’s an existing version of this rubric with the squares filled in with more information, but leaving them blank allows you, as you’re conducting your assessment, to fill them in with your own narrative comments, thus engaging in “qualitative evaluation.” There’s also a “rubric wizard” on Taskstream that can easily help you construct rubrics from scratch.

### **Does everyone have to do these assessments?**

The mandate from ACCJC, our accrediting body, is that all of our classes have undergone some sort of learning assessment by 2012, so we have to get moving. The suggestion has been that we start with the most heavily-enrolled classes and/or the ones most important in the major, so as to reach the highest number of students. If a course is heavily enrolled, at least 30% of its sections need to have conducted assessments to produce a valid statistical sample.

### **Why do we have to go to such lengths to demonstrate our subject matter expertise?**

For one thing, SLOs aren’t measuring anyone’s subject matter expertise as much as trying to ascertain what students are learning, and how well. But the more complete answer to this question is multi-dimensional and could fill up quite a few pages. The publication of *A Nation At Risk* in 1983 is often cited as the basis of many of the external pressures on educational practices that have followed, including SLOs, but realistically, there’s always been pressure on college and staff employees to be accountable for what we do: among other things, that’s what the tenure process and class observations and even student evaluations are all about. Our current political climate features some specific external pressures, however, which are important to understand. One of them is accreditation, the subject of the next question.

### **Aren't we really doing all this just to satisfy accreditation requirements?**

To deny that the SLO “movement” has been, for the most part, accreditation-driven would be foolish: it's just a fact. But there are some assumptions stemming from that fact that are more questionable. For example:

*The results of assessments will ultimately be used for some sort of punitive action against individual faculty members.* I don't think that's true, and it's been denied by everyone in a position to know. But what I think doesn't matter: nobody really knows. What *is* known is that punitive action – namely, the imposition of national educational standards – *can* be taken by the federal government upon the reauthorization of the Higher Education Opportunity Act in 2013. In fact, that's what will probably happen if we don't demonstrate we've got our act together with outcomes assessment, which means demonstrating that we have structures in place to measure our students' learning and talk about ways to improve it. (One of those structures is Taskstream). So it just makes sense to keep this process in our own hands, where it belongs.

*Because these assessments have become mandatory, we won't learn anything useful from them.* That would seem entirely dependent on how much care we take with them and the nature of our discussions in interpreting their results. It's true that if the process is seen as cynical busy-work, there's little probability of it generating any meaningful or authentic results. But that's a self-fulfilling prophecy: assessment that doesn't help to promote student learning *is* a waste of time. An alternate view would be to try to get as much benefit as possible from these mandates. After all assessment is something we've always done, in one form or another: incorporating new assessment techniques into one's pedagogy isn't particularly difficult, and might make our jobs – and the students' experiences – easier and more positive.

*Doing assessment is more work, and it's not in our job contracts.* For some, yes, absolutely: for others, who regularly practice assessment, not so much. Is caring about the results of our efforts in the classroom and trying to improve them part of our work? Yes, absolutely.

### **Should the students know that they're being assessed?**

Students should always know they're being assessed, and why. Moreover, they should be involved in the process and have their goals taken into consideration: For example, before a scheduled assessment, you might tell the students something like this: "Besides getting a grade in the class, I'm also interested in what you take away from it – what things you feel more confident with and better able to handle as a result of taking the class. At Mesa, and at other colleges, those abilities are called 'student learning outcomes' – and one of the outcomes in the English department (or your own department or service area or administrative unit) is 'critical

thinking' (or whatever outcome[s] you're assessing). So besides the grade on this final essay (project/report/lab chart/appointment, etc.), I'll also be looking at what it tells us about your ability to think critically, which is important for your future classes and experiences outside of college too." Obviously, you can use your own language here – the point is that assessment shouldn't be a mystery to the students who are being assessed. In fact, you might even let them come up with some assessment methods of their own.

We usually won't assess the same cohort of students (although we might), and the turnover at community colleges is obviously rapid. If we use the same methods and measures over time, though, what we're ultimately assessing are those methods: just because they're used on different students doesn't mean the results we get aren't meaningful.

### **Do I have to put my course-level and or department SLOs on my syllabi?**

The ACCJC says we do. Here's how I handle that on my syllabi (right after I list the course objectives on Curricunet. Again, you should feel free to use your own language: "In addition, the student learning outcomes (SLOs) for all classes in the English Department at Mesa are Critical Thinking, Creative Thinking, Rhetorical Awareness (as readers and writers), and Global Awareness. Think of some different ways you can demonstrate your facility with these important skills as well; one way to make your experience in this class more relevant is to apply your abilities in these areas to whatever classes and/or life experiences come next for you."

### **What's the bottom line for SLOs? Why have they attracted so much controversy?**

Everyone knows by now that SLOs have political implications, like potential extra workload without compensation and potential interference from outside bodies about what we do in the classroom, and I've tried to cover some of that skepticism in this document: I think we always have to remain wary about these possibilities. But I always go back to the idea implicit within the word "outcomes," namely, that these are the ends of education. So the questions are: what do we want the results of our work in the classroom to be? What's the purpose of a college education? Why do we do what we do?

One thing we've learned from the Basic Skills initiative these last few years is that a great majority of our students come to us unprepared for basic academic work: they haven't developed the habits of mind that would lead to successful results. So for me, one big goal is to leave my students a little more prepared for that basic academic work than when they came to me. That is, beyond helping my students achieve knowledge of the specific details of my discipline, English, I hope my classes also teach some of the habits of what might be called basic academic

mindfulness – the habits our students will need to succeed, not only in later classes, but in later professions as well.

In other words, I want my students to become more reflective, more thoughtful, more aware of ambiguity and of the many possible perspectives with which people might approach a problem. Indeed, the ability to react thoughtfully, in a considered manner, instead of only in a knee-jerk, impulsive way, might be one definition of “critical thinking.” In college, after all, we learn how to compromise, and to work in groups with people with whom we might disagree; we learn, hopefully, persistence and tenacity, the ability to stick with a complicated problem until a solution has been reached; we learn tolerance. These aren’t inconsequential skills.

And there’s another outcome, almost never articulated in discussions like this one, higher even in our educational cosmology than institutional outcomes – namely, the desire for people to live healthy, happy, fulfilled and sufficient lives. As the man said, “life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness”: the practice of assessing SLOs, at its best, is only another means to that end.