

CREATING A CULTURE OF ASSESSMENT AT COLLEGE OF SAN MATEO

What is meaningful assessment that impacts student learning? How do we weave it into the culture of the College? Can we transform assessment at CSM? This paper seeks to:

- Identify new directions in Student Learning Outcome (SLO) assessment and other efforts directed at improving student learning;
- Articulate a vision for a culture of assessment that underpins these new initiatives; and
- Describe an institutional framework that integrates this culture into college practice.

New Directions

In recent years, California community colleges have been awash in initiatives. Guided Pathways, assembly bills addressing placement (AB705) and dual enrollment (AB288), and the expansion of the Promise Program all tackle the issue of student success from different angles. But they share a priority: That colleges should offer students, especially less advantaged students, a clear, easily accessible, well-lit path towards achieving their academic goals, with plenty of support along the way.

These initiatives are more than piecemeal reforms. There are all sorts of implications for how colleges work – how to support underprepared students as effectively as possible; how to preserve an exploratory GE-curriculum in an academic culture that increasingly emphasizes a direct path; how to organize the institution in a way that makes sense to students (for instance, will departments need to be reorganized to reflect reorganized majors?). And much of this takes us into uncharted territory. As we throw out our old model of getting underprepared students ready for college work through developmental courses, community colleges will be something of a laboratory, exploring curriculum and pedagogical strategies and sifting out what does and doesn't work.

But changes are not only coming from above. In recent years, faculty and staff at CSM have worked to articulate our goals, and to develop and improve institutional procedures focusing on continuous improvement in teaching and learning.

Education Master Plan. In Fall 2018, after an extensive, College-wide consultative process led internally by Planning, Research, Innovation and Effectiveness (PRIE), the College produced a new Education Master Plan (EMP). This EMP articulates a clear vision for the College going forward, and identifies five strategic priorities developed from a SWOT analysis through focus groups with over 250 faculty and staff participants:

1. Supporting our students' aspirations
2. Creating equitable opportunities for all of our students
3. Committing to progressive and innovative teaching and learning
4. Building on a tradition of service to the community
5. Enhancing a culture of participation and communication

These strategic priorities effectively define the criteria by which we assess how well we are doing our work. They lead us to reflect on our practices. How can we improve equitable opportunities? Where are the problems, and what can we do about them? How can we create and support campus-wide engagement? What do we need to know about how our students are learning, and which teaching or curriculum strategies are working for them?

Student Learning Outcomes Assessment. In Fall 2018, after an extensive review of our SLO assessment practices, the College rolled out a new approach to outcomes assessment. The old SLO assessment cycle, with its emphasis on comprehensive, generic data-gathering followed by analysis, created a vehicle mostly suited to identifying areas in need of improvement. This was only modestly effective, and focused on the wrong part of the problem. Many pressing issues in student learning, such as equity gaps or skill deficits, are already well-known to us from our achievement data as well as our daily work with students.

The new model, by contrast, focuses on the most elusive part of the traditional assessment cycle, namely “closing the loop.” It creates a vehicle for addressing improvements in student learning. Discipline and service faculty start not by gathering data, but by prioritizing a specific question about what students are or aren't learning, and/or what students are doing. They gather the data that will answer those questions and report the results. Assessment questions may call for research. For example, do students who take ENGL 105 (Intensive Composition & Reading) succeed in the subsequent ENGL 110 (Composition, Literature & Critical Thinking) and ENGL 165 (Composition, Argument & Critical Thinking) at comparable rates to those taking ENGL 100 (Composition and Reading)? Faculty

may also evaluate a pedagogical or curricular strategy intended to improve student learning (Does contract grading work for our students?). Assessment projects can be small-scale, or long-term; they can be discipline- or service-specific, or interdisciplinary. Assessment plans are easily accessible, reported in program review, and finally summarized in a biennial report produced by the College Assessment Committee.

The process is designed to engage faculty and staff across the campus in evidence-based discussions about student learning. It allows them to focus their energies on the questions that matter; to give them a structure to explore problems and solutions; to encourage communication and collaboration between and beyond discipline and service boundaries; and to identify interdisciplinary projects of widespread interest. All SLO evidence-based discussion will be tied to strategic priorities and major initiatives on campus.

Program Review. The program review reporting cycle integrates discipline and service work with students into institutional planning. In Fall 2018, both the analysis of program review and the reporting form itself were revised to clarify their role as a vehicle for College-wide discussion about student learning, and to connect grassroots-level concerns over strengths, weaknesses, trends and achievements with professional development activities. Revisions to program review are now tied to our strategic priorities and linked to our major initiatives.

The new program review form eliminated non-academic questions about productivity, shifted resource requests to a separate annual process, and concentrated instead on asking faculty and staff to report on issues directly relating to the quality of their programs and services – with special attention to plans, achievements or challenges around equity and SLO or SAO assessment.

The new process has been expanded to include input from a greater number of constituents. It requires that instructional and learning center program review reports be read and analyzed by the Institutional Planning Committee (IPC), the Academic Senate Governing Council, the Committee on Teaching and Learning (CTL) (a merger of the College Assessment Committee, the Committee on Academic Excellence and the Library Advisory Committee); and by the Director of Equity and the Distance Education Coordinator. This creates a forum for an interdisciplinary, evidence-based, faculty-driven analysis and discussion of student learning across the College; it also connects faculty needs with flex day planning, especially around equity or distance education issues.

Committee on Teaching and Learning. In Fall 2019, three Academic Senate sub-committees – the College Assessment Committee (CAC), the Committee for Academic Excellence (CAE), and the Library Advisory Committee (LAC) – merged into one Committee on Teaching and Learning. The goal is to promote communication and collaboration between the related functions of learning outcomes assessment, flex day workshop planning, training for new faculty (through the CAE’s New Faculty Institute), and the Library’s academic support activities for faculty and students.

Equity. To prepare for program review, discipline faculty are supplied with student achievement data disaggregated by ethnicity, gender, modality, age, and more recently, by socio-economic status. They perceive that current program review data asks them to answer complex questions about equity that extend beyond the classroom. With the appointment of a Director of Equity, the College is creating a more systematically supported and clearly articulated vision for a campus that supports equitable learning opportunities for *all* students, through ongoing equity-centered professional development and practice. The 2019 Student Equity Plan describes, among other goals, the creation of a Social Justice Research Academy – a professional development site for CSM faculty, staff and administrators focusing on equity-centered pedagogy and practices, as well as equity-centered research methods and course design.

An Expanded Scope for the Planning, Research, Innovation and Effectiveness Office. The role of PRIE at CSM is expanding beyond traditional institutional research. Traditionally, PRIE compiles state-mandated data analytics, provides data for College-wide decision making, supplies disciplines with basic disaggregated student achievement data for program review analysis, and responds to faculty or staff data analysis questions. CSM faculty and staff have voracious appetites for data (partly spurred by the new approach to SLO assessment). Since October of 2018, PRIE has supplied data for nearly 200 requests. Rather than respond to all requests without strategy, PRIE has a new vision that leads College-wide strategic planning and focuses research around our 5 strategic priorities. PRIE is repositioning itself as a strategic planning and consultative research service for the College. To fulfill the vision, there is a new research dashboard, research request process, Institutional Review Board, workshops on research methods for faculty intending to conduct surveys or focus groups, distributed self-service research, and research/planning/strategy consultation services. To further the vision, PRIE is partnering with the CTL to create workshops and training resources for faculty to conduct their own research into student learning and other issues.

The goal is to distribute research skills and support faculty/staff participation in a widespread, inclusive culture of assessment.

A Community of Practice: CSM as a Research Institution

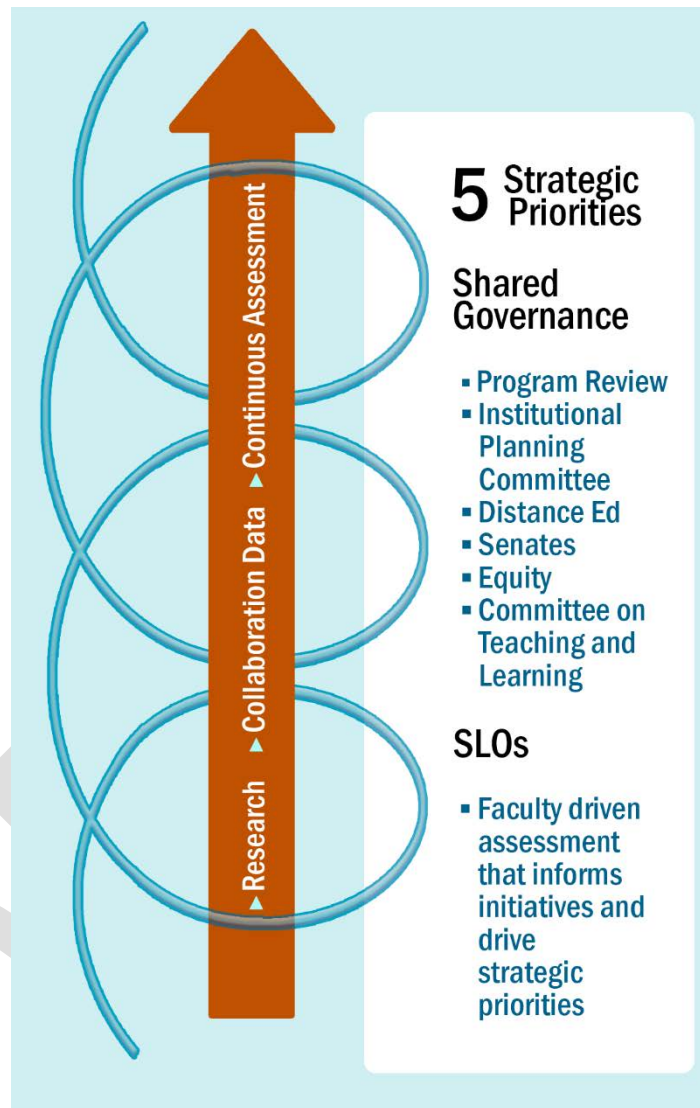
The initiatives above all point in the same direction and reflect shared priorities. They emphasize engagement, collaboration and communication at the discipline level, where faculty and staff discuss their assessment priorities; and at the College level, by creating forums to tackle issues in student learning and achievement that go beyond discipline or service boundaries (e.g., equity). They aim to connect faculty needs not only with institutional planning, but specifically with professional development.

Most significant, perhaps, is that these initiatives help disseminate a culture of research into student learning assessment. This culture involves everyone in conversations about what needs to improve, where the problems lie, what outcomes we can expect for our students, what is working, and what isn't.

This is exactly the sort of culture community colleges need to develop. The challenges we face will require creative thinking, experimentation, evaluation, and constant communication – a real community of practice. As we move forward with AB705, Guided Pathways' and the rest, colleges need to develop:

- Resources that support faculty and staff as they try to frame meaningful, manageable research questions;
- Systems and planning structures that promote cross discipline interdepartmental communication and feedback;
- An assessment framework that permits faculty and staff to ask hard questions about what is and isn't working to achieve our learning goals; and
- A reporting framework that ensures widespread communication, and provides plenty of opportunities for faculty and staff to come together to look at student learning from different angles.

Alignment, coordination, and communication of our community of practice is depicted in the graphic below:



CSM's Community of Practice

Ideally, our CSM Community of Practice focuses on sharing out grassroots and College-level research, and has a number of key features:

- An SLO assessment process that asks faculty and staff to start with a research question;
- Clear communication between committees, so that efforts are not duplicated in different parts of the institution;

- Support for faculty research, both data analysis and training in research methods;
- Clear delineation between the contributions of top-down assessment activities (College-level committees and forums looking at student learning across the College; research projects into student learning initiated and conducted by larger interdisciplinary committees) and grassroots assessment activities (discipline and service level activities discussed in program review);
- Reporting procedures and forms that permit faculty and staff, at the discipline and service level, to easily access their own assessment plans and results; it is less important to provide administrators with a convenient overview than it is for grassroots faculty and staff to keep in touch with their own assessment planning;
- A program review process that focuses on creating forums for interdisciplinary discussion and feedback;
- Regular College-wide communication about results of research into student learning and achievement, through reports and flex day activities;
- Identification of College-wide research projects into student learning; and
- A clear sense of mission. The purpose of outcomes assessment and other procedures is to support continuous improvement in student learning, both in general, and in relation to specific challenges or needs (e.g., improving student reading; or, improving student outcomes for underserved marginalized student populations).

Education is not an industrial process, and a college is not a machine whose components need to be regularly cleaned and aligned to ensure its smooth functioning. Education is a dynamic experience, and a college is an ecosystem, where the most productive organization informs ongoing exploration and communication.

Going Forward

CSM's strategic priorities, SLOs, and program implementation enact our mission in an inclusive, participatory community of practice. CSM has made great strides towards establishing an inclusive, productive culture of assessment. We have begun to put into place interdisciplinary discussion forums, research support, priorities and equity-centered techniques for learning assessment, and other components.

As this vision evolves, we will likely review committee structures and roles, or reporting procedures, to make improvements in communication and support. A more developed culture of assessment might well include an annual signature research project into teaching and learning, selected by the Committee on Teaching and Learning; more analyst consultation to support faculty and staff research projects; and a more systematic way to showcase results through our EMP implementation.

We have laid the groundwork for a more effective, inclusive and meaningful approach to assessment. As we continue down the path, we encourage you to check back with us for updates and progress!

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