24

CityU's Approach to Outcomes Assessment

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Abstract

As the higher education community continues to increase its focus on student learning as the essential hallmark of the quality and value of a college education, more outcomes assessment models are being developed. City University of Seattle's model uses its centrally-designed curriculum to embed outcomes at the course, program, and institution level, and to define assessments to provide evidence of student achievement of those outcomes. Program directors ensure this evidence is reviewed annually as part of a continuous improvement process to determine necessary program improvements designed to increase levels of student learning. The model links the outcomes assessment process back to the university's mission and character as a teaching institution,

with an emphasis on authentic assessment strategies. The challenges and successes of this model are discussed, along with suggestions for further research.

Introduction

Calls for accountability in higher education continue to increase. All higher education institutions are under pressure to improve their ability to identify and assess student learning outcomes. Policy makers, students, faculty, administrators, and the general public seek ways to judge the quality of a college education not only by the credentials of faculty or their level of research engagement but also by determining what students have actually learned as a result of their education. Over recent decades many educators advocated a change in culture from an emphasis on what teachers teach to an emphasis on what students actually learn (Azeem, Gondal, Abida, Farah, Hussain, & Munira, 2009; Candela, Dalley, & Benzel-Lindley, 2006; Carmichael, Palermo, Reeve, & Vallence, 2001; Chickering, Gamson, & Barsi, 1989; Cuevas, Matveev, & Miller, 2010; Lombardi, 2008; Mancuso, 2001; Pierce & Kalkman, 2003). This phenomenon includes the need for colleges and universities to clearly articulate what students ought to learn in a course or program and to assess whether that learning actually took place. This transition is underway as a result of attempts to improve the value of a student's education and to demonstrate that value to internal and external constituents.

City University of Seattle began its focused efforts to create a robust student learning outcomes assessment system in 2000, placing it squarely in the center of these wider developments in higher education and providing one model for rising to the challenge of increased accountability for student learning. Using its centralized curriculum design and development process, CityU aligns learning outcomes at the institutional, program, and course level, ensures they are effectively embedded in the curriculum, and prescribes assessments that provide direct evidence of student learning in support of those outcomes. This model is most useful for institutions where curriculum design can be coordi-nated across faculty for an entire program or school. Its applicability is limited for institutions where each course is individually created by a faculty member in isolation from other courses and/or programs. However, even these faculty members can benefit from understanding how to align assessments and learning outcomes inside an individual course, ensuring that the work produced by students gives true evidence of achieving the desired learning outcomes.

Background

CityU's approach to student learning outcomes assessment has as its framework the models developed by Suskie (2004) and implemented in various institutional settings (Barroso & Morgan, 2009; Candela et al., 2006; Chyung, Stepich, & Cox, 2006; Cuevas et al., 2010; Fabry, 2009; Levandar & Mikkola, 2009; MacAskill, Goho, Richard, Anderson, & Stuhldreier, 2008). The basic approach is driven by four questions that can apply to any college or university to assess student learning at any level—institution-wide, in a degree program, or in an individual course.

1. What does the university want students to learn?
2. How does the university enable students to master that learning?
3. How does the university assess student learning?
4. How does the university use the results of assessment to enhance future success for its students?

CityU answers the first question by establishing specific learning outcomes at the course, program, and institutional levels. A learning outcome is a simple, action-oriented statement that describes what a student should know and/or be able to do as a result of the learning that takes place (Suskie, 2004). The second question drives the development of learning activities arranged in course modules that are demonstrably aligned with those outcomes, using the principles of competency-based instruction (Chyung et al., 2006).

To answer the third question, an approach that emphasizes authentic assessment is used. Authentic assessment requires students to engage in learning activities that resemble as closely as possible those they will do in the "real world" of their disciplines and professions (Candela et al., 2006; Cuevas et al., 2010; Lombardi, 2008). These activities then result in direct evidence of student learning, or "tangible, visible, self-explanatory evidence of exactly what students have and haven't learned" (Suskie, 2004, p. 95). Examples include business students producing comprehensive business plans for new or established companies, students in teacher preparation programs being observed in student teaching settings, counseling students providing video tapes of sessions with clients, and technology students completing programming projects. These assessments are then evaluated by faculty using rubrics specially designed to identify the elements that demonstrate achievement of the learning outcomes for the course, program, and/or institution.

The last question is perhaps the most important. The results of the analysis of student achievement of learning outcomes must be used to improve programs (Barroso & Morgan, 2009; Fabry, 2009; Lombardi, 2008; Suskie, 2004). An annual student learning outcomes assessment process is utilized in which program directors analyze the results in terms of four possible areas for improvement: curricula, instruction, student preparation, and assessment instruments or processes. They identify actions to take as a result of this analysis and determine the impact of those actions on the following year's assessment data.

This basic four-step approach—what should students learn, how will they learn it, how will their learning be assessed, and how will the results of that assessment be used—can be applied in any institution. The next section of this chapter describes in some detail how CityU uses its centralized curriculum development system to support its learning outcomes assessment process.

Learning Outcomes Assessment at CityU

Overview of Outcomes Assessment Practices at CityU

City University of Seattle uses an outcomes-based approach to teaching and learning in alignment with its mission and nature as a higher education institution devoted to applied learning. Because the majority of instruction is delivered by teaching faculty, academically qualified professional practitioners, CityU needs to provide them with a well-designed curriculum that ensures student learning outcomes are embedded in the courses. The curriculum model also needs to allow for the creativity and unique expertise of faculty to construct learning experiences that meet the needs of diverse groups of students.

CityU's Academic Model includes major components that align with CityU's mission and describe the dimensions of a CityU education: a focus on student learning, the use of professional practitioner-faculty, ensuring curricular relevance to the workplace, service to students, accessibility, and responsiveness. The Academic Model provides a framework for ensuring that learning experiences are designed to support clearly articulated outcomes at the course, program, and institutional levels. Educational experiences are carefully designed by faculty to encourage self-directed learning within an appropriately defined structure of expectations. With the focus on applying theory to practical experience, learning activities form explicit links among the crucial abilities of an educated professional: critical thinking, reflection, and ethical practice. Multiple paths to demonstrating each competency are available to learners as appropriate. Students are actively encouraged to define and take responsibility for their own contributions to the learning process, with the understanding that their engagement is critical for substantive learning to take place.

Six CityU Learning Goals describe exit competencies for graduates of all degree programs. All CityU graduates will

1. Exhibit professional competency and a sense of professional identity, bring to the workplace the knowledge and

skills intrinsic to professional success, understand the basic values and mission of the fields in which they are working, use technology to facilitate their work, understand basic technical concepts, and demonstrate understanding through practical application.

2. Employ strong communication and interpersonal skills, communicate effectively both orally and in writing, interact and work with others in a collaborative manner, negotiate difficult interpersonal situations to bring about solutions to problems that benefit all involved.

3. Demonstrate critical thinking and information literacy; think critically and creatively; reflect upon their own work and the larger context in which it takes place; find, access, evaluate, and use information to solve problems; and consider the complex implications of actions they take and decisions they make.

4. Make a strong commitment to ethical practice and service in their professions and communities; take responsibility for their own actions and exhibit high standards of conduct in their professional lives; be aware of the ethical expectations of their profession and hold themselves accountable to those standards; be active contributors to their professional communities and associations, and informed and socially responsible citizens of their communities as well as of the world.

5. Embrace diverse and global perspectives; work collaboratively with individuals from a variety of backgrounds; learn from the beliefs, values, and cultures of others; realize that varied viewpoints bring strength and richness to the workplace; and demonstrate an awareness of the interrelation of diverse components of a project or situation.

6. Commit to lifelong learning, becoming self-directed and information literate in seeking out ways to continue learning throughout their lifetimes.

These institutional-level Learning Goals were designed to align the program learning outcomes already in place with CityU's mission and to ensure consistency across programs. Since 2005

the university has engaged in an intensive curriculum design process to ensure students achieve learning outcomes at the course, program, and institutional levels. Administrative faculty who have responsibility for an academic program begin by defining program-level learning outcomes that incorporate the CityU Learning Goals; this process typically involves industry professionals to ensure relevance to the contemporary workplace, a prime value of a CityU education.

Course development also starts with a set of learning outcomes, and those outcomes are carefully aligned to the program-level outcomes. Faculty design the ways in which students will provide authentic evidence of their learning via the use of internships, projects, and other activities that mimic as closely as possible the work required in the profession. A package of information about a course, including its alignment to the program outcomes and place in the program sequence, the major assessments, and a set of recommended learning activities, is provided to the course instructor. This is especially important given the nature of the practitioner faculty at CityU, who are for the most part seasoned professionals who bring real-world experience to their teaching rather than coming from a more traditional academic background. The university takes very seriously its obligation to provide these faculty members with the tools needed to support student achievement of the learning outcomes at the course, program, and institutional level. This has led to a significant investment of time and effort in the curriculum design and outcomes assessment process on the part of its administrative faculty, its curriculum and faculty development office, and its institutional effectiveness office.

All courses at CityU are developed using this process. The university invested in software that "houses" the curriculum development process, using the essential elements of content management to align learning outcomes, assessments, and learning activities. It provides faculty with the means of collaboration on course development as well as providing clear documentation of the linkages between all levels of learning outcomes and means of assessment. It also builds in flexibility to accommodate the different types of students served by the university's programs around the world; as long as outcomes and the means of assessing them

are consistent, learning activities are implemented to be responsive to the specific environment and students, and to take advantage of the expertise and creativity of the course instructor.

As faculty design new programs or revise existing programs, they identify appropriate means of collecting direct evidence of student learning related to the program outcomes. Evidence of student learning is analyzed in two ways. First, it is typically graded by the course instructor using a rubric developed to determine how well students achieved the course outcomes. This becomes part of the student's grade for the course and feedback is provided to the student regarding his or her performance. Formative assessments in courses are used to promote learning; summative assessments demonstrate final achievement of the course outcomes.

Second, the evidence of student learning is incorporated into assessment at the program level. Often an additional rubric is used that relates the elements of the student work to the program outcomes rather than to the course outcomes. In many programs this second level of analysis is done blindly by a separate set of evaluators to ensure lack of bias. These data can then be disaggregated by location as well to ensure students at various CityU locations in the US and abroad are achieving at comparable levels. This is also the stage at which the analysis process links back to the CityU Learning Goals. The alignment documented in the program-design phase is used to evaluate how well students are achieving these learning goals. For example, a program outcome is identified as relating to the CityU Learning Goal on diverse and global perspectives; the same evidence of student learning is used to assess both levels.

Once the analysis is concluded, program directors develop action items related to any necessary program improvements. These can include improvement in instruction (better preparation or training of faculty teaching specific courses); improvement in curriculum (adding or deleting content, rearranging course sequences); improvement in student preparation (ensuring the development of writing or quantitative skills); or adjustments in the assessment tools or process itself (redesigning a capstone project or rubric to better align with program outcomes).

Programs provide annual student learning outcomes assessment reports that capture the analysis of evidence, planned improvements, and the impact of any past changes on student learning.

Impact of Assessment Practices

Students can be assured that the courses they are taking are designed to engage them in learning that is relevant to their program outcomes and that the evidence of learning they produce is relevant to their professional ambitions. The intended learning outcomes are transparent to students, providing them with clear understanding of what they must achieve; this goes well beyond information about content that will be covered in a course.

Faculty also benefit from this increased transparency, as they know from the beginning not only the intended outcomes of the course but also how those outcomes support achievement of the program and university level outcomes. They can adjust their instruction far more effectively, using their expertise and creativity to engage students in learning activities that are relevant at all levels.

Issues Related to Assessment Practices

This practice of embedding multiple levels of learning outcomes in curriculum design is made possible by CityU's use of a central curriculum development process. A more common practice in many higher education institutions is to prescribe only the topic or content of a course, leaving the actual course design to the individual faculty member. While this maximizes the faculty member's ability to customize a course to his or her interests and expertise, it makes it much more difficult to align learning outcomes. By using a central process, CityU can provide its practitioner faculty with a fully designed course, one that they can still effectively customize, while using all the resources available to ensure students meet the learning outcomes.

CityU's centrally developed curricula allows for strong alignment of CityU Learning Goals, program outcomes, and assessments. Faculty spend a significant amount of time designing authentic assessments that provide evidence of student learning on program outcomes and CityU Learning Goals. The emphasis on authentic assessment means that summative assessments are generally highly relevant to the professional settings in which students will work. Students invest time and energy in completing the assessments as a result of this relevance. However, this approach also adds complexity to the process of evaluating assessments and distilling results into information that lends itself to program improvements; moreover, it makes comparisons across programs and to national data sets difficult.

The linking of program learning outcomes to the CityU Learning Goals reinforces the emphasis on authentic assessment. Rather than "layering over" another set of learning outcomes and another set of assessment tools, which would risk disconnecting the CityU Learning Goals from the curricula and instruction, this approach requires faculty to emphasize the connections between them. Core skills like critical thinking and information literacy are not afterthoughts in curriculum design; they are intrinsic to the curricula in each program. It is necessary to establish clear, concise, and valid connections between the program learning outcomes and the CityU Learning Goals. In many of the program assessment reports, faculty find this to be quite a challenge. Faculty are refining program and course outcomes, focusing on what it really means to align with the CityU Learning Goals and identifying the best ways to collect and analyze direct evidence of student learning.

The best way to infuse the CityU Learning Goals into program level outcomes is to drill down to the course level, ensure a connection between the course outcomes and the CityU Learning Goals, and then carry that connection forward to the program level. This is done by first establishing a solid link between course outcomes and related CityU Learning Goals. Next, it is important to ensure that the assessments used to measure those outcomes do, in fact, provide evidence of achievement on both the course outcomes and the CityU Learning Goals. This process naturally supports the link between the program outcomes and the CityU Learning Goals once it is properly established at the course level.

Future Research Directions

This technique has allowed the university to build a rich portfolio of data regarding its approach to student learning outcomes assessment. It is in the third year of collecting and analyzing the results of student learning in all its degree programs via annual outcomes assessment reports, and is beginning a more coordinated approach to the collection of evidence of student learning via an e-portfolio and assessment system. Looking forward, the university will seek ways to incorporate the evidence of student achievement as the most important measure of the success and value of its curriculum development system. Over time it should result in improved student learning.

Specific areas of future research include questions related to the linkage of instruction to achievement of student learning outcomes. The university is engaged in defining what it means by "highly effective" faculty, using data from student evaluations and supervisor observations. The ability to link the effectiveness of teaching to actual student learning outcomes data would strengthen this definition significantly. An initial scan of best practices of the faculty receiving the highest ratings from student evaluations was completed two years ago; in the past year the School of Management has also analyzed student comments from poor instructor evaluations. This resulted in a faculty development focus on providing students with developmental feedback to guide their learning; follow-up research in the coming year could help determine the effectiveness of this intervention.

Conclusion

A university's learning outcomes assessment process must be driven by its mission and values. The mission and values are thus incorporated into learning goals established at the institutional,

program, and course levels; these goals are integrated into curriculum design and program delivery. The framework provided by the Academic Model informs curriculum design and program delivery as well. The university must then require programs to analyze evidence of student learning regularly, forming the basis for continuous improvement. These improvement plans are then implemented to improve student learning, and their results are captured in the next round of data collection and evidence.

CityU remains committed to refining its learning outcomes assessment strategies, using the direct evidence of student learning to improve programs, and ultimately ensuring that student learning is consistent with the university's mission to change lives for good by providing high-quality and relevant lifelong education to anyone with the desire to learn.

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