By now, we are all aware that Student Learning Outcomes (SLOs) tell students what they should learn and faculty what they should teach and assess. They also tell employers, accreditors, colleagues, and other stakeholders what a given class, or program of study, should prepare students to know and do. However, we can use SLOs and their assessment in other major decision making processes.

Student Learning Outcomes and New Course/Program Approvals

Consider this case: A health discipline does a very thorough job of preparing proposals for several new courses in biostatistics, including statements of SLOs for each. During the approval process, the Math department objects to having another department offering these courses when they already teach similar courses. The committee members then asked the math faculty to provide their SLOs for the classes they felt were the equivalent. When no SLOs were forthcoming, the new courses were approved.

The next question that is usually asked: “Are there any controlled studies of the effects on student learning of articulating learning outcomes at either the institutional or the course level?” So in other words, does having SLOs really matter?

A 2013 article in *Change* by E. Pascarella and C. Blaich reports findings from a study that involved first-year full-time undergraduates in 19 colleges and universities. The students were assessed 3 times: upon entry in fall 2006, at the end of the first year in spring 2007, and at the end of the fourth year in 2010. The students completed several instruments that measured aspects of cognitive and personal development. The authors found statistically significant positive associations between students’ perceptions of being exposed to clear and organized instruction in their courses and retention the second year as well as four-year gains in critical thinking. Also noted by Blaich, “clear and organized instructions includes not just clear goals, but clear assignments, well-organized classes, and some other basic teaching practices.

So what does this tell us? Academic units proposing new courses or programs should include SLOs that can be compared to similar existing programs. This allows the approvers to ascertain that the program(s) being proposed represents a true innovation on campus.

Still not convinced? Schutti-Pfeil and Weinbauer-Heidel conducted a qualitative study in a bachelor’s degree program at the University of Applied Sciences, Upper Austria to see if 3 specific determinants from the transfer of training research could be applied in higher education. These included: 1) clear objectives and expectations understood by students, 2) content validity—extent to which learners perceive a match between learning content and the objectives, and 3) active practice—the extent to which students have opportunities to apply what they are learning in class related to the objectives. Students’ performance on a case study analysis assigned during their last term in college was found to be influenced most significantly by “…clearly defined objectives and consistent communication about these objectives throughout a degree program”.

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References:
