

## SLO Standards: Where We Are, and How We Can Move Forward

by Toño Ramirez

As our **October 9-12, 2017** visit from the **Accrediting Commission for Community and Junior Colleges approaches**, it's prudent to look at the roles we all play in ensuring that we meet the standards to which we will be held accountable. One of these requires us to demonstrate ongoing assessment of learning outcomes for all courses. A few years back we worked together to establish our first assessments, and managed to record at least one assessment for all of our SLOs. But to demonstrate an *ongoing* commitment to this work, we need to show multiple assessment cycles. To this end, I'd like to call attention to the fact that roughly **36%** of instructional SLOs for our courses have assessments recorded in the TracDat system for "Cycle 2" (Cycle 2 spans Fall 2014 through Spring 2019). We are, in short, behind schedule. I anticipate that it will be a matter of focus during our accreditation visit if we don't improve significantly by September.

I've been spending a lot of time thinking about how we got here, and what to do about it. Having served as SLO coordinator at De Anza for several years, I've come to appreciate several respects in which the role is analogous to my role as an instructor in the philosophy department. In both cases, I'm committed to helping large groups of people move toward two separate (though hopefully connected) ends.

On the one hand, I aim to foster learning and growth. In the classroom, this involves making course materials relevant and meaningful to my students, independently of the units and grades that our institution employs to acknowledge their work. When I wear my SLO hat, this involves encouraging faculty and staff to see that authentic assessment brings its own rewards, enabling us to find tools and methods that can allow us to constantly improve upon the work we do with our students.

On the other hand, I facilitate the completion of discrete tasks. In the classroom, this involves developing assignments with clear requirements and deadlines, holding students accountable to these, and offering any assistance I can to help my students get the work done. As SLO Coordinator, this entails helping faculty and staff with the logistics of developing and recording their SLO assessment work in the TracDat system.

When working with our students, we all want the tasks that we assign to work in harmonious conjunction with authentic learning, but it doesn't always turn out this way. Sometimes our students learn well but the grades don't show it, and sometimes they earn high marks without learning much. Learning and achievement sometimes come apart. We strive to avoid these scenarios, but it's rarely easy. I have to imagine that all faculty have experienced the tension between tasks and learning, and the complicated balancing act that goes into mitigating it.

The same goes for the work of our SLO Team. We've had hundreds of wonderful conversations with individual members of our campus community over the years, and are sympathetic to the fact that the challenges facing faculty and staff in recording SLO assessments tend to mimic obstacles that students face when trying to complete coursework.

Sometimes the problem stems primarily from confusion about the assignment itself, or from hardships in executing the logistics of the work. Students sometimes struggle to understand how to organize essays or lab reports, even if the underlying content of the assignment is deeply fascinating to them. Similarly, faculty might sincerely want to develop authentic assessment methods, but not have a working sense of how to go about it. Students might find it difficult to meet a submission deadline because of a heavy workload in other courses. Similarly, faculty may find that their many responsibilities make it difficult to carve out time for SLO assessment.

Other times, however, the problem stems from doubts about the intrinsic value of the work. Perfectly capable students might exhibit middling performances if they perceive assignments to be nothing more than 'busy work'. Similarly, faculty and staff may struggle to find the motivation to complete SLO assessments if they are regarded as little more than 'shelf documents'.

Just as different students in the same section might face unique combinations of these challenges in our classrooms, I'm aware that different departments and programs are apt to face their own unique concerns in completing SLO work. And just as my responsibility to my students involves meeting them where they are, the SLO team at De Anza is deeply committed to meeting you where you are. Is your department struggling primarily with logistical issues (like navigating TracDat, scheduling assessments, or figuring out how to develop or execute assessment strategies)? Are you instead struggling to convince your colleagues (or yourself) that this work can be truly meaningful? We can help with any of these issues, and are happy to develop an approach that is sensitive to the unique challenges and dynamics of your program. Feel free to contact us any time for an appointment, or to drop in during any of our weekly SLO office hours (Wednesdays from 4-5 PM, Thursdays from 10-11 AM during the spring quarter).

It's not too late. You might be surprised to learn how quickly and easily assessment cycles can be completed. At De Anza we enjoy the complete freedom to develop our own learning outcomes and assessments, and all of the work is faculty driven. Mary, Veronica and I are not only SLO coordinators. We are also your staff and faculty colleagues. Let's work together to tailor strategies specific to your needs to ensure that we both get the work done, and find the value in it.