By Karen Kane, ASLO Subcommittee Member and Newsletter Editor

Twas the night before the end of Fall 2010,
The LBCC faculty were unsatisfied and restless, but then,
Out on the quad, all covered with renovation equipment and ladders,
A big sign appeared to remind them of what really matters.
A large “A… S… L… O” appeared through the fog of the night,
With the “S” bigger than all, and the “S” was really bright.
Carried by nine tiny reindeer (one had a nose with a large red light),
Saying as only reindeer can….”Let’s get this important concept settled and straight tonight.”

To begin let’s light a candle and start the festivities right,
We will share our zawadi and talk about student success long into the night.
And then that red-nosed furry creature spoke,
His name was Rudolph, and he was rather wise, for a spindly-legged bloke.
He said “Hark the Herald, let the Academic Senate sing,
Give the Union voice, and make sure that all faculty know they are a part of this team.
No one is more important, we are talented one and all,
Make sure everyone gets to contribute; if not the ASLO efforts will fall.
Honor the voices of those big and small,
And remember that Students should come first … hear my call.”

Then Dasher and Prancer and Comet and Blitzen,
Stepped up to the podium, joined by Vixen.
They gazed at the faculty with eyes bright and clear,
And said, “Listen carefully to this lesson of trust, my deers.
We have history in this area you see,
We used to tease and bully Rudolph, because he had different gifts than we.
But then we realized that if we will listen and work together,
Our trust in each other is a value to make proficiency much better.
Our ASLO sleigh was heavy; it listed left and right,
We realized Rudolph’s nose, although odd, red and bright,
Would help us accomplish our goals, and make everything right.
So we combined our efforts and decided to trust,
If we wanted student success, we agreed it was a must.”
Onward outcomes and assessments, and rubrics and data.
On all of this we need to quit being “hate-uhs.” (Reindeer slang)

It’s Students that matter to us one and all,
It’s Students that make this institution of higher education stand tall.
It’s Students that deserve outcomes, assessment and explanation,
It’s Students that will continue to make the USA a great nation.

So as the Fall 2010 semester comes to an end,
Let us be thankful we are in this together, and trust our colleagues and friends.
As we wish Happy Holidays to all, and dash away near and far,
Let’s remember our legacy and our future and,

The Way We Are.
Why Are We Assessing?
By Linda Suskie

It was exactly 10 years ago that I ended my year as director of the Assessment Forum at the old American Association for Higher Education. Over these 10 years I’ve done countless workshops and presentations on assessing student learning, and I’ve seen a real change in their focus. Ten years ago most of my workshops were what I call “Assessment 101”: getting started with assessment. Today, most people seem to understand the basics, and more people are doing assessment, not just talking about it or creating a plan to do it. The arguments against doing assessment — and the hope of some that this is a fad that will go away soon — are fading. People increasingly recognize that accreditation standards for assessment are reasonable and appropriate, especially when compared with some alternatives such as those proposed by the Spellings Commission a few years ago.

And more and more people and organizations are getting into the assessment game, providing us with much-needed scholarship and support. A decade ago books on student learning assessment were relatively scarce, but today there’s a wealth of excellent resources:

- We now have a number of intriguing published instruments although, for many, evidence of their quality and value remains a work in progress.
- Assessment database systems — whether locally developed or commercial — can now make it easier to collect and make sense of the information we’re collecting.
- A decade ago, many philanthropies stopped funding research to improve higher education, because they saw little commitment to reform within the American higher education community. Today a number of important foundations are back in the game, And many of their grants focus on either assessment or ways to use assessment.
- The work of the Association of American Colleges and Universities has advanced us light-years in our capacity to understand and assess our general education and liberal education curriculums. The “Greater Expectations” report, LEAP goals, and VALUE rubrics have been particularly noteworthy achievements.
- Bob Mundhenk has initiated the Association for the Assessment of Learning in Higher Education, our first national organization for assessment practitioners.
- The New Leadership Alliance for Student Learning and Accountability, helmed by David Paris, is developing standards for excellence in assessment practice.
- The National Institute for Learning Outcomes Assessment, led by Stan Ikenberry, Peter Ewell, and George Kuh, has delivered a number of significant research papers on assessment practices.
- And, thanks to the research of Trudy Banta, Karen Black, Beth Jones, and others, we’re starting to see evidence that, yes, assessment can lead to improved teaching and learning.

DID YOU KNOW?

- Courses coming due for Course Review in 2010-11 should be collecting outcomes assessment evidence NOW!
- Programs coming due for Program Review in 2011-12 should be collecting outcomes assessment evidence NOW!
- All program assessment plans are due NOW!!
- The ASLO Subcommittee wants to know what you DON’T know so we can address the confusion together!!
- Sample rubrics, course AND program assessment plans are available on the Outcomes Assessment (SLO & SUO) link.
- WE are all in this together!
  Please direct all questions to an ASLO Subcommittee Member.

DON’T FORGET!!

Course SLOs should now be included on your syllabi!

All faculty are needed and responsible to make valuable contributions to our Outcomes Assessment Process!

ASLO Subcommittee Members and SLO Officers are available to answer questions and assist with assessment course and program plans ...
Contact them today!
By Kim Anderson

Reflections

As we wind down to the end of this calendar year it is customary for some to reflect back on what transpired, make some sense of it, and resolve to set a small goal or two for the New Year. Sounds like the outcomes assessment process to me. And that’s the crux of this matter. As I have been meeting with faculty the most repeated phrase I have heard is, “Is that all it is?” This outcomes assessment protocol is rooted in a familiar approach, common to many professions.

The guiding maxim that the ASLO Subcommittee instituted references the “3 Ms: Meaningful, Measurable, and Manageable”. The outcomes assessment process, as faculty-driven, is as meaningful as the faculty's intent and approach, but it does require attention. Such a concerted effort along with other equally important responsibilities can feel exhausting at times. Then sprinkle in the budget strains and it may seem to shift the tide to a waterfall effect. That is why this College provided initial clerical assistance for faculty, the purchase of the TracDat database, and the support of the SLO Officers’ position.

And with that, the essential players, the faculty, have churned away at this professional responsibility—even though understanding might not have been comprehensive. And while some might view that as a reason to stop and wait the vast majority of faculty have heard that the outcomes assessment process is dynamic and iterative. Thus, as we learn, refine, and adapt the process will accommodate such professional development. Because the point is to engage with our courses and programs in such a manner to make some decisions and take some actions relevant to the improvement of student learning.

So as this year concludes please accept my sincere thanks for your awareness of this process and your professional engagement in such. We have learned much and are making progress. There will be some glitches but nothing that we cannot manage as thoughtful education professionals. Let’s also approach any such snags with the knowledge that we are all going through this together for the first time and that collaboratively and collegially we can continue to make good progress while adapting. Let’s allow our assessment plans to unfold and learn from the experience with all good intent to improve such for our students.

Happy Holidays.

Current Status

Course Level

Currently 92% of course assessment plans have been submitted. Please email the course assessment plans to your SLO Officer. The recent efforts of the following departments and programs should be acknowledged in this endeavor. Congratulations to: FACS Program (as of November 30, 2010).

Those remaining course assessment plans should be submitted to their department SLO Officers. The collection of assessment information is now in full swing and faculty should be managing the internal process so results can be analyzed and reported in Spring 2011.

Program Level

Every program needs to develop an assessment plan (don’t forget the program mission statement too) and submitted to your SLO Officer for uploaded into TracDat. You may view this template, the directions, Program Review cycle, and suggestions on the SLO Program Level page or contact an ASLO Subcommittee member or your SLO Officer for guidance.

The faculty has contributed to the noticeable progress in this area too. Currently 75% of program assessment plans have been submitted. Program assessment plans were due by December 1, 2010. Your department’s SLO Officer is ready to assist department faculty with this task.

The recent efforts of the following departments/programs should be acknowledged in this endeavor. Congratulations to: CBIS Department and Architecture/Drafting Department (as of November 30, 2010).

If it is to be ... it is up to ME!
All faculty are needed and responsible to make valuable contributions to our Outcomes Assessment Process!
**Why Are We Assessing?**

From page 2

So today many of us are now sitting on quite a pile of assessment data and information. Most of my workshops now focus not on getting started with assessment but on understanding and using the information that’s been collected.

Amid all this progress, however, we seem to have lost our way. Too many of us have focused on the route we’re traveling: whether assessment should be value-added; the improvement versus accountability debate; entering assessment data into a database; pulling together a report for an accreditor. We’ve been so focused on the details of our route that we’ve lost sight of our destination. As a result, we’re spending too much time and effort going off on side roads, dealing with roadblocks, and sometimes even going in circles.

Our destination, which is what we should be focusing on, is the purpose of assessment. Over the last decades, we’ve consistently talked about two purposes of assessment: improvement and accountability. The thinking has been that improvement means using assessment to identify problems — things that need improvement — while accountability means using assessment to show that we’re already doing a great job and need no improvement. A great deal has been written about the need to reconcile these two seemingly disparate purposes.

Framing assessment’s purpose as this dichotomy has always troubled me. It divides us, and it confuses a lot of our colleagues. We need to start viewing assessment as having common purposes that everyone — faculty, administrators, accreditors, government policymakers, employers, and others — can agree on.

The most important purpose of assessment should be not improvement or accountability but their common aim: everyone wants students to get the best possible education. Everyone wants them to learn what’s most important. A college’s mission statement and goals are essentially promises that the college is making to its students, their families, employers, and society. Today’s world needs people with the attributes we promise. We want students to get the best possible education. Everyone wants students to get the best possible education. Everyone wants students to get the best possible education.

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SOME BASIC INFORMATION

It has come to our attention that some of us don’t know how to FIND some BASIC info … so here goes!

To find SLO/SUO General Information:

Go to LBCC homepage; click on Faculty/Staff link; scroll down and find Outcomes Assessment (SLO & SUO) link; go to the gray column on the left side of the page and find—

- SLO information — you can find course and program level links. Within these you can find sample plans and rubrics and almost anything you need to help complete YOUR plans
- SUO information — click on the general information link to find just about anything you ever wanted to know about SUOs
- Resources & Links — click on this to access the newsletter and other important resources
- Course Assessment Plan template and Directions documents — SLO page, course level section, lavender alert icon near top of page
- Program Assessment Plan template and Training documents (SLO page, program level section, lavender alert icon, near top of page
- Sample Rubrics (SLO page, Assessment section, scroll down to the Examples of Course Level Rubrics, ’other colleges’ heading, and … voila!
- College Outcomes (LBCC Home Page — www.lbcc.edu — click on ‘about’ or just wait for the drop down menu)

Information is EVERYWHERE ! If you still can’t find what you need … ask an ASLO Subcommittee Member

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**One Good Thing - (People Are Talking!)**

Martha Childress is a full-time student, hoping to get into the LBCC nursing program. She has served on the Cultural Affairs Committee, has been a Vice-Chairman of the Club Board and has served on committees for activities such as the Reggae Fest, Easter Events, and the Martin Luther King Parade. Martha is used to using outcomes and assessment for student activities. She reports that all activity planning begins with goals and outcomes for each event. Outcomes are listed for the people planning the event, as well as the students who will attend. Martha says that these outcomes guide the planning. At the end of each event, the committee sits and assesses it by number of people in attendance, goals accomplished, outcomes achieved. The group talks about the event and then writes an evaluation plan for what they will do the same, and or/differently the next year.

Recently, Martha noticed that her Reading 881 syllabus had 4–5 outcomes on it regarding what the class was supposed to learn. She was surprised, as she had never noticed that outcomes were on the syllabus of any of her classes before. She said that after reading the outcomes, she had great clarity about what the course was, and what the teacher was striving for the class to learn. She reports that “a light bulb came on.” This was the same thing that students had been doing to plan their activities, and to make each event more meaningful and better. She was excited that her classes were now listing outcomes as this helped her realize where the class was going. Martha is hoping that all of her teachers will do this as she reports that it isn’t “just her” who realizes that outcomes on syllabi benefit students.
and global society. Imagine what the world would be like if every one of our graduates achieved the goals we promise them! We need people with those traits, and we need them now. Assessment is simply a vital tool to help us make sure we fulfill the crucial promises we make to our students and society.

Too many people don’t seem to understand that simple truth. As a result, today we seem to be devoting more time, money, thought, and effort to assessment than to helping faculty help students learn as effectively as possible. When our colleagues have disappointing assessment results, and they don’t know what to do to improve them.

- I wonder how many have been made aware that, in some respects, we are living in a golden age of higher education, coming off a quarter-century of solid research on practices that promote deep, lasting learning.
- I wonder how many are pointed to the many excellent resources we now have on good teaching practices, including books, journals, conferences and, increasingly, teaching-learning centers right on campus.
- I wonder how many of the graduate programs they attended include the study and practice of contemporary research on effective higher education pedagogies.

No wonder so many of us are struggling to make sense of our assessment results! Too many of us are separating work on assessment from work on improving teaching and learning, when they should be two sides of the same coin. We need to bring our work on teaching, learning, and assessment together. We need organizations, conferences, publications, and grant funding on the triumvirate of teaching, learning, and assessment, not just teaching and learning or just assessment.

But even if we help faculty learn about research-informed pedagogies, do they have meaningful incentives to use them? Providing students with the best possible education often means changing what we do, and that means time and work. Much of the higher education community has no real incentive to change how we help students learn. And if there’s little incentive to change or be innovative, there’s little reason to assess how well we’re keeping our promises.

Our second common purpose of assessment should be making sure not only that students learn what’s important, but that their learning is of appropriate scope, depth, and rigor. Doug Eder frames this by suggesting three questions that we should answer through assessment:

1. What have our students learned?
2. Are we satisfied with what they’ve learned?
3. If not, what are we doing about it?

What I’m talking about here is Doug’s second question: Are we satisfied with what our students have learned? In short, what’s good enough?

This is an incredibly difficult question to answer, and thus one that many of us have been avoiding. It’s a big reason why we’re seeing assessment results pile up and not get used. We may know that students average 3.4 on a 5-point rubric or score at the 68th percentile on a national exam, but too often we have no idea whether or not these results are good enough.

In order to decide whether our results are indeed good enough, we need to think about assessment results in new ways. First, we need to understand that assessment results—or indeed any numbers—have meaning only when we compare them against some kind of appropriate target or benchmark. So far I’ve seen too little discussion on how to set such targets, other than sweeping oversimplifications such as “assessments must always yield comparable results” or “assessments must always be value-added.” In truth, there are many ways to set targets—at least 10, by my count. Each approach has pros and cons, and none is a panacea, appropriate for every situation.

Second, we need to move beyond navel-gazing. Yes, we are each proud of how much we expect of our students, and it’s easy to feel offended when our professional judgment is challenged. But a reality today, whether we like it or not, is that we are faced with a lack of trust. Big chunks of society no longer trust government, financial institutions, and charities. So it shouldn’t be surprising that some government policymakers and employers don’t trust us to provide an appropriately rigorous education. And we don’t always trust one another, such as when students are transferring between colleges.

So the days of saying student work is good or bad based solely on our own private judgment are over. Today we need externally informed targets or standards that we can justify as appropriately rigorous. We need to consult more with others—employers, graduate programs, disciplinary associations, perhaps colleagues at peer institutions—about the knowledge and skills they expect from our graduates and the degree of scope, depth, and rigor they expect. Meaningful change will not come without broad conversations about what a degree means, along with recognition that a tenet of American higher education is that one size does not fit all.

Third, we need to accept how good we already are, so we can recognize success when we see it. We in the higher education community are so bright, so driven, so analytical, and so self-critical that we think anything less than perfection is failure. On the other hand, if we get anything close to perfection, we think that something must be wrong—the assessment is flawed or our standards are too low. This way lies madness.

Because we don’t recognize our successes ourselves, we keep their light under the proverbial bushel. We don’t yet share with employers and government policymakers...
systematic, clear, and convincing evidence of how effective we are and what we're doing to be even more effective. And we haven't figured out a way to tell the story of our effectiveness in 25 words or less, which is what busy people want and need. Yes, some of us are starting to post some numbers publicly, but numbers need to be put into context and translated into information in order to have meaning. Yes, we brag about our award-winning student math team or star alumni. But today's parents, employers, and government policymakers are savvier consumers, so those anecdotes don't work anymore. Today people want and need to know not about our star math students but how successful we are with our run-of-the-mill students who struggle with math.

Because we're not telling the stories of our successful outcomes in simple, understandable terms, the public continues to define quality using the outdated concept of inputs like faculty credentials, student aptitude, and institutional wealth — things that by themselves don’t say a whole lot about student learning. And people like to invest in success. Because the public doesn't know how good we are at helping students learn, it doesn't yet give us all the support we need in our quest to give our students the best possible education.

Our third common purpose of assessment is something we don't want to talk about, but it’s a reality that isn’t going away: it's how we spend our money. Actually, it's not our money. Every college and university is simply a steward of other people's money: tuition from our students and their families, funds from taxpayers, gifts from donors, grants from foundations. As stewards, we have an obligation to use our resources prudently; in ways that we are reasonably sure will be both successful and reasonably cost-effective. Here again, assessment is simply a vital tool to help us do this. But while virtually every college and university has had to make draconian budget cuts in the last couple of years, with more to come, I wonder how many are using solid, systematic evidence — including assessment evidence — to inform those decisions.

For example, when class sizes are increased, are those increases based on evidence on how class size affects learning? When classes are moved online, do those transitions flow from evidence of online teaching practices that promote learning? When student support programs are cut back, are those decisions informed by evidence of the impact of the programs on student success? When academic programs are trimmed, do those decisions flow from evidence of student learning as well as costs?

We need to refocus our assessment work not only on making sure students get the best possible education but also on improving our cost-effectiveness in doing so. We can’t afford to spend a dime on anything unless we have evidence that the dime will be effectively spent. We can't afford to cut a dime without evidence of the impact of the cut on student learning and success. We need, more than ever, a culture of evidence-informed planning and decision-making.

And that includes looking at the cost-effectiveness of assessment itself. As we invest more and more time and money into assessment work, assessment instruments, assessment data systems, and so on, we need to ask whether these expenditures are giving us enough value to be worth the investment of our scarce resources.

So before we start another assessment cycle, we need to sit back and reflect, starting with my favorite assessment question, “Why?” Why are we assessing this particular goal and not others? Why do we think this particular goal is so important? Why did we choose this particular assessment strategy? How has it been helpful? And has its value been in proportion to the time and money we’ve spent on it?

Yes, we have accomplished a tremendous amount in the last decade, and we have so much to be proud of. But we are not yet at our destination.

Now is the time to bring these three common purposes of assessment to the forefront. In order to tackle them, we need to work as a community, with greater and broader dialogue and collaboration than we see now. Now is the time to move our focus from the road we are traveling to our destination: a point at which we all are prudent, informed stewards of our resources... a point at which we each have clear, appropriate, justifiable, and externally-informed standards for student learning. Most importantly, now is the time to move our focus from assessment to learning, and to keeping our promises. Only then can we make higher education as great as it needs to be.

Linda Suskie is vice president of the Middle States Commission on Higher Education. This essay is adapted from her talk at the 2010 Assessment Institute.