

## IN SEARCH OF THE WIZARD OF ASSESSMENT

*At first, the shift in measurement of educational success from bodies in seats to learning outcomes sent student affairs educators at California State University, Northridge, into a panic. Persistence, support, and a clear framework for understanding learning led to the discovery that there was a little bit of assessment wizard in all of them.*

**By Terry D. Piper**

**L**IKE DOROTHY in the Wizard of Oz, faculty members and student affairs educators often believe that the answers they are seeking—about assessment, in this case—are secrets kept by an all-knowing, powerful person. If they can just find the Wizard of Assessment and be granted the secret assessment formula, all will be well. The student affairs educators at California State University, Northridge (CSU Northridge), must have felt a lot like Dorothy when I announced that we would be developing learning outcome goals and assessment strategies. They looked as if a tornado had picked them up and deposited them into an uncomfortable and threatening new land. Just as Dorothy set out to find the Wizard of Oz, who would know the secret of getting back to Kansas, student affairs set out to find the way to assess learning outcomes.

Dorothy discovered that the wizard was an ordinary person and the way home was within herself. CSU Northridge student affairs educators discovered that assessing learning outcomes was not a secret held by an assessment

wizard but a capacity that they themselves were capable of developing. This is the story of their journey.

“Sylvester, there’s a storm blowin’ up, a whopper!”  
—Professor Marvel

**I**’LL FOREVER REMEMBER the day in summer 2001 when I introduced the concept of learning outcomes and assessment at a divisionwide staff meeting. I had been appointed vice president for student affairs six months earlier and was becoming oriented to the campus, the division, and the staff. The department directors, the associate vice presidents, and I had already begun shaping our future by developing a new mission statement, a statement of values, and statements of belief about our students, our roles, and our responsibilities. I was pleased and encouraged that our new

mission statement began, “The division of student affairs exists to advance student learning. . . .” I had articulated that perspective during my interviews for the position of vice president and at every opportunity after arriv-

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ing on campus. I interpreted the staff's willingness to begin the mission statement with a declaration about student learning as evidence that they were solidly behind me and ready to forge a new role for student affairs on our campus. We were, I assumed, prepared to begin translating our mission statement into action through the development of learning outcome goals and objectives. I didn't see the storm clouds on the horizon.

Setting goals was not a new concept for the division, just as it would not be for most faculty members. Whereas classroom instructors have traditionally defined course goals in terms of content coverage, staff members have traditionally defined goals based on programs and services, planned improvements, and new projects. Rarely have such goal and objective statements indicated the desired impacts or outcomes for students, and when they did, the outcomes were typically implied or vague. I believed that our espoused commitment to student learning required a new, clearer approach to setting goals.

The meeting began well. We reviewed the new mission, values, and belief statements. I set the context by talking about the emerging emphasis on student learning in our field and ended with excerpts from our accreditation standards that established the expectation that student learning outcomes would be demonstrated. I thought that I had prepared the staff well for an introduction to the process of writing learning outcomes and assessment plans.

Staff members were attentive, though restless as I began to explain the process. We would no longer be writing operational and administrative goals; instead, we would write learning outcomes. Instead of reporting on numbers of programs and students served, we would assess learning in order to demonstrate our accomplishments. The fidgeting stopped. Glances of disbelief were exchanged. Stunned silence gave way to expressions of concern and irritation.

"Toto, I've got a feeling we're not in Kansas anymore."

—Dorothy

**W**RITING LEARNING OUTCOMES and assessment plans seemed so simple to me that I just couldn't understand the staff's reaction. All the staff

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had to do was state the department mission, the goals encompassed by achieving that mission, the objectives that contributed to goal accomplishment, the strategies associated with the objectives, what students would know or be able to do as a result of the strategies, and plans for assessing the extent to which learning occurred. I even provided examples:

Goal: New student orientation will contribute to first-year retention rates.

Objective: Students will become aware of and use academic success strategies.

Strategy: Panel presentation by successful students.

Learning Outcome: Students will be able to explain an academic success strategy and their plans to implement it.

Assessment Plan: Mid-semester survey of plan implementation.

"You can't measure what we do." "How are we supposed to add assessment to what we do? We're already overloaded!" "If we focus on learning goals, when are we supposed to get our real work done?" "Do the other divisions have to do this?" "Am I going to be evaluated on whether the students accomplish the outcomes?" "If we don't write real goals, how will you know what we really do?" These comments and questions are a small sample of the reactions to my explanation of learning outcomes and assessment. I could not understand why a shift from "what we do" to "what impact it has" would cause such consternation, but it was obvious that the process would not be easy.

Over the next several months, department staff began writing learning outcomes and assessment plans. We held several goal-writing workshops, and I provided extensive feedback as draft documents were produced. Frustration mounted as staff members struggled to adapt to the new expectations. Progress was slow during the first year. Although learning outcomes were eventually written, little assessment of those outcomes occurred.

The lack of assessment data created a dilemma. The approach we were using was intended to be iterative. The analysis and interpretation of outcome assessment data were supposed to result in revised objectives and strategies that would increase accomplishment of learning outcomes.

Much later, I came to understand that what I saw as a slight change in the way we expressed our goals was experienced by staff as a fundamental change in the way

they saw their roles and responsibilities. I had challenged their very sense of professional identity. Tim Trevan, CSUN director of campus housing, in an American College Personnel Association conference presentation of a paper that he coauthored with me and Marcia Baxter Magolda in 2005, explained that staff had difficulty seeing the big picture, were concerned about workload, were uncertain about expectations, questioned the required identity shift and leap of faith, and lacked experience and expertise. Feelings of confusion, apprehension, and insecurity were coupled with information overload. Interestingly, our faculty was also engaged in writing learning outcomes and seemed to be having the same reaction.

“Follow the yellow brick road.”

—The Munchkins

LACK OF ASSESSMENT DATA during the first year hampered efforts to make iterative changes to the second year’s learning outcomes. Instead, recognizing that we had not written goals, objectives, strategies, learning outcomes, and assessment plans that were internally congruent, we focused on aligning and reframing the first year’s effort. Not long into this process, we realized that we needed a better framework for learning outcomes, as well as some assessment training. We found the framework we needed in Marcia Baxter Magolda’s Learning Partnership Model.

The Learning Partnership Model, based on Baxter Magolda’s longitudinal study of young adult development, provides a developmental context for establishing learning outcomes as well as an approach to promoting student development. In the book she wrote with Patricia King, *Learning Partnerships*, Baxter Magolda notes that the Learning Partnership Model addresses the three key college learning outcomes identified by current higher education scholars: cognitive maturity, integrated identity, and mature relationships. Each outcome is characterized by a set of skills, abilities, and attitudes that can be the focus of learning outcomes. For example, cognitive maturity can be demonstrated by the ability to make decisions by applying knowledge and understanding from multiple perspectives; integrated identity can be demonstrated by the ability to state an opinion, assess strengths and weaknesses, and advocate for oneself; and mature relationships can be demonstrated by the ability to manage conflict, collaborate, and understand other cultures.

A specific learning outcome can be written to achieve a particular level of outcome complexity. The least complex level is represented by basic awareness of resources, policies, procedures, and information. A more

complex level is demonstrated by the use of basic skills, such as doing tasks, organizing responsibilities, and accessing and sharing information. Advanced skills are evidenced through negotiation, collaboration, conflict management, and teamwork. At the most complex level, students demonstrate complex abilities, such as interpreting and evaluating data, making wise judgments, acting responsibly, and integrating diverse perspectives.

The appropriate learning outcome level of complexity is determined by the student’s developmental capacity. (See Baxter Magolda and King’s *Learning Partnerships* for a thorough discussion of this concept.) Bridging the gap between the student’s current capacity and the capacity needed to achieve the desired outcome is the focus of our practice. Learning outcome assessment, then, is the process of determining whether the skill, ability, or attitude that defines the desired outcome has been achieved.

Using the Learning Partnerships Model to guide the development of learning outcomes allowed the staff to let go of vision-based outcomes (for example, “Students will appreciate diversity”) and to establish outcomes that were achievable and assessable (for example, “Students will be able to discuss their ethnic or cultural background and that of at least one other person who is ethnically or culturally different from them”). Here is another example of a learning outcome and assessment statement:

Goal: The University Student Union will support skill development and student engagement in campus life through volunteer service.

Objective: Volunteers will develop programming, personnel management, and leadership skills.

Strategies: Orient volunteers to policies, practices, and procedures related to programming or goal setting and achievement; support a committee structure and ongoing training that provide opportunities for students to participate and learn about various aspects of organizational development and processing (for example, team building, group dynamics, delegation, communication, parliamentary procedure, meeting facilitation, and multiculturalism).

Learning Outcomes: Students will develop, utilize, or enhance communication skills, customer service skills, analytical and decision-making skills, and project management skills.

Assessment Plan: Each student volunteer, with his or her advisor, will define the learning outcome level to be achieved on the basis of the student's current level of proficiency. The advisor will monitor progress in the student's ability to perform the agreed-on skills.

As we entered our third year of assessing learning goals, we saw a need to increase everyone's knowledge of assessment practice and to develop in-house assessment experts. To allow staff members to provide peer support, share ideas, and explore alternative strategies, we established an informal network of staff members who were engaged in assessment. A four-part series of assessment workshops was offered in order to demystify the process and provide basic assessment knowledge. Small groups of staff members attended assessment conferences. As a result, the staff became less anxious, less fearful, and more confident. They began practicing assessment activities, including the use of pre/post questionnaires, focus groups, and criteria-based observation.

"She had to find it out for herself."  
—Glinda, the Good Witch

**M**OMENTUM for defining and assessing learning outcomes was definitely picking up as we entered year four. In his 2005 ACPA conference presentation, Tim Trevan characterized the midpoint of our transition as a time of enthusiasm, engagement, optimism, and mutual learning. He attributed this shift in attitudes to the adoption of a framework that translated the abstract concept of student learning into concrete ways of promoting learning, which increased staff members' sense of competence. The ability to implement strategies to promote learning allowed staff to take ownership of the process instead of feeling that learning outcomes and assessment had been imposed on them. And it was important that these positive changes were reinforced by campus colleagues' recognition of the division's efforts to take on a new identity.

Adopting a framework for understanding learning outcomes allowed us to become more proficient at defining and promoting the learning that we wanted students to achieve. As our desired outcomes became more specific, we were able to state more clearly how we would know whether they had been achieved. And

the specificity of the measurement criteria permitted us to develop effective assessment strategies. Whereas assessment was initially understood as a lengthy survey administered at the end of the year, it now was understood as a wide variety of strategies that could be used to identify the learning that had occurred. An important example of this change can be found at our student health center. One of the health center outcomes is that students will understand the cause of their health problem and ways to prevent it in the future. This information is presented to the student by the medical practitioner during the medical examination. To determine whether learning has been achieved, the discharge nurse includes two discharge questions: What did the doctor tell you about your illness? How will you avoid it in the future? While students' responses don't tell us whether they will use the knowledge, the responses certainly do tell us whether students have gained the knowledge they need to make informed choices.

Placing student learning at the core of student affairs work and making a commitment to assessing learning outcomes represents a paradigm shift for traditional student affairs educators. Using an organizing framework—whether it is the Learning Partnership Model, the Framework for Assessing Learning and Development Outcomes from the Council for the Advancement of Standards (authored by Terrell Strayhorn), or something else—provides structure and reduces ambiguity. Take it slowly; we tried to convert our operational practices to incorporate learning outcomes all at once and became overwhelmed. Be prepared to deal with assessment phobia by providing training, support, and consultation. Keep morale high by aiming low and celebrating small steps. Most important, be persistent; it will pay off.

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#### NOTES

- Baxter Magolda, M. B., & King, P. M. (2004). *Learning partnerships: Theory and models of practice to educate for self-authorship*. Sterling, VA: Stylus.
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