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# Moving from Compliance to a Culture of Inquiry: SLO Implementation and Professional Development in California Community Colleges

## UCLA Educational Leadership Program Dissertation

### Dissertation Topic

Professional Development that Supports CA Community College Faculty to Complete Student Learning Outcome (SLO) Assessment

### Research Questions

1. What professional development frameworks exist for community college instructors to successfully and meaningfully complete the SLO assessment cycle?

2. Are there significant differences between SLO Coordinators, Academic Senate Presidents, and Chief Instructional Officers in their attitudes toward the importance of SLO assessment and related professional development activities?

3. According to community college faculty and assessment leaders, what are the challenges in completing the SLO assessment cycle? How are those challenges addressed?
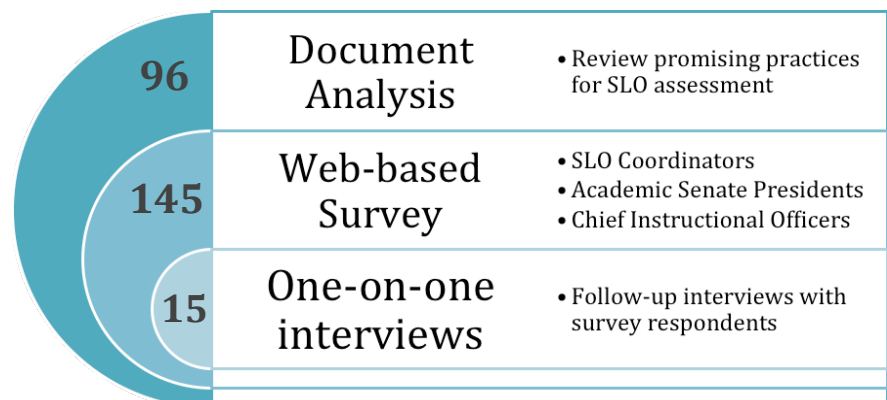
# Overview

- Low degree completion and transfer rates in community colleges have created a focus on reform to improve teacher quality and student learning.

- Improving student learning outcomes (SLOs) is at the forefront of community college accreditation standards.

- Few professional development models exist to train faculty how to develop or assess SLOs.

# Research Design & Methods

This study used an explanatory sequential mixed methods design to identify SLO assessment practices and challenges at the 112 California community colleges. The research population included CA community college SLO leaders: faculty and administrators who are leading assessment efforts at their colleges.

- SLO/Assessment Coordinators (faculty)

- Academic Senate Presidents (faculty)

- Chief Instructional Officers (administrators)

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| **96** | **Document Analysis** | • Review promising practices for SLO assessment |
| **145** | **Web-based Survey** | • SLO Coordinators<br>• Academic Senate Presidents<br>• Chief Instructional Officers |
| **15** | **One-on-one interviews** | • Follow-up interviews with survey respondents |

# Findings
## Promising Practices for SLO Assessment & Professional Development

**Faculty Drive SLO Assessment**

- Almost half of the interview participants described faculty playing a lead role in directing assessment efforts.  SLOs are seen as a matter of curriculum and under the domain of faculty. Rather than administration or an external group defining SLOs for courses, specifying assessment methods, and reviewing the results, faculty themselves exercise their academic freedom in writing SLOs, determining measurement instruments, and analyzing data.

*Initially, some faculty felt that the entire SLO concept was a fraud and that it would never work. This misconception was overcome by creating and investing in a faculty-driven, faculty-based process. Importantly, it was not the concept of a few forward-thinking faculty; it became a topic of discussion for all faculty, on every key committee.  - Document Review of POWER Award Winner: SLO Hall of Fame*

**SLO Assessments as Integral to Program Review and Institutional Planning**

- Through strategic planning, departments set goals to address gaps identified from the program review process to enhance overall institutional effectiveness. SLO assessment is a further extension of institutional effectiveness since it measures student learning at the course, program, or institutional level.  Almost 90% of ACCJC College Status Reports on SLO Implementation Reports and a quarter of the NILOA Case Studies and POWER Awards described their colleges integrating SLO assessment with program review and planning.

*SLOs are a critical component of program reviews…. Program reviews include thoughtful discussions about improving instructional methods, adjusting assessment tools, clarifying assignments or assessments to better reflect the desired outcome.  Program reviews suggesting changes and improvements via additional resources have these recommendations added to annual plans. - Document Review of College Status Report on SLO Assessment Implementation*

**Faculty Need Professional Development in Assessment Methodology and Pedagogy to Improve Teaching and Learning**

- As described in the existing literature, community college faculty are experts in their content, but many lack adequate training to successfully complete the SLO assessment cycle.  Faculty need professional development to understand and participate in the SLO cycle.  Furthermore, faculty need training in both assessment methodology in order to effectively measure SLOs and in pedagogy so they are equipped to make improvements in teaching and learning.

*Many of them [faculty] did not set out to be educators. It just kind of fell in their lap or they realized they really like teaching. They didn't have anything about methodology or assessment or instruction ever, any kind of training on that. I find that I have been having to train faculty on what assessment is… - Laurie, SLO Coordinator*

# Faculty and Administrator Attitudes Toward SLO Assessment

### CIOs Place Greater Importance on and Have Stronger Institutional Motivation for SLO Assessment

- In the survey, the factor representing the importance of SLO assessment measured the role SLO assessment plays in institutional effectiveness. There was a statistically significant difference in mean scores between Academic Senate Presidents and CIOs. CIOs had the highest mean score, which indicates their higher perceived importance of SLO assessment.

- The factor measuring motivation for assessment identified the extent to which assessment is motivated by internal interests for improving educational quality or a response to external mandates such as accreditation. Again there was a statistically significant difference in mean scores between Senate Presidents and CIOs. CIOs have a higher internal motivation for SLO assessment activities over external requirements.

# Defining and Dealing with Challenges to SLO Assessment

### SLO Coordinators and Senate Presidents Report Greater Need for Professional Development

- The Resources category measured availability of resources to support college SLO assessment activities. SLO Coordinators and Academic Senate Presidents identified a significant need for additional resources to support outcomes assessment. CIOs place greater importance on assessment yet do not recognize the importance of resources to support assessment efforts.

- For Professional Development, SLO Coordinators and Academic Senate presidents report a higher need for professional development for SLO assessment than CIOs. Again, CIOs place a greater importance on SLOs but do not identify a need for professional development to support faculty in assessment. The qualitative data also reinforced this finding.

### Increased Emphasis on SLO Assessment Leads to Compliance with Accreditation Standards and Contributes to Fears of Increased Accountability

- The overall purpose of SLO assessment is to improve teaching and learning through an ongoing, systematic, documented process. Updated accreditation standards that place a stronger emphasis on SLO assessment have created a focus on meeting the standards with compliance rather than the quality of assessments. This culture of heightened accountability creates a fear of assessment results being tied to individual faculty performance evaluation.

*Part of the problem that I've always had…. The way they were presented it really sounded like issues of accountability - you're not doing your job, and so on. It just struck me as No Child Left Behind-ish. There are states where if your students don't hit the standardized test, you don't get a raise or your school doesn't get*

*more money or whatever. To me, that's just the backwards way to go about it. I'm a bit frustrated by it, and I'd be happy if they went away, but they're not going away so ... It's one of those wishful thinkings.* - Glenn, Senate President

### Faculty Perceive a Lack of Meaning and Value in SLO Assessment

- Another challenge to assessment is conducting meaningful assessments that lead to data to inform faculty in making improvements to teaching and learning.  Because of the challenge of focusing on compliance, faculty who are participating in assessment comply by conducting an assessment but do not analyze the results nor identify changes that lead to improvements.  There is an additional challenge of faculty buy-in to SLO assessment.  Some resist assessment because they view it as extra work or do not see the value to SLO assessment.

*In the past and to a lesser degree currently, the major challenge has been faculty buy-in. Some faculty are on board and find it worthwhile, others perform the tasks because they must, but feel it [is] a waste of time, and there a few holdouts who don't submit reports or whose reports are below standards.* - Survey Response

### Establishing a Culture of Assessment, Inquiry, and Collaboration to Counter Faculty's Uneven Participation

- Community colleges can shift from a focus on compliance with accreditation standards by building a culture of assessment and inquiry.   A college commitment to inquiry creates an environment that fosters assessment.  Collaboration between faculty and administrators is another key component because a college-wide commitment involves multiple stakeholders through a continuous cycle of assessment.  Moreover, a culture of assessment includes space for faculty to conduct authentic assessments to gather meaningful results that directly tie to learning gaps and areas for improvement.  Faculty need to feel safe to take risks and have open, honest conversations about assessment results.

*We've got our SLO data, but it's only one tiny piece now. With the student success and equity initiatives that have come down in the last couple of years, we're now looking at other data. We're looking at completion rates, transfer rates, and persistence rates. We're looking at online versus on ground. We're looking at the equity of very specific populations and how are they completing courses versus others…. The [student learning] outcomes are becoming just one of the pieces of data instead of the only piece of data.* - Lisa, CIO

# Recommendations

- Colleges should connect SLO assessment efforts with Professional Development Committees/ Centers on campus.

- Colleges should align priorities of SLO assessment and related professional development with the appropriate resources and training.

- Faculty need time, space, and opportunities for open discussions about student learning so they can improve student success in a safe environment.