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California State University, Monterey Bay Assessment Philosophy & Practice

California State University, Monterey Bay

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California State University, Monterey Bay

Assessment Philosophy & Practice

Learning outcomes are only as good as the conversations they generate.

Supporting Student Learning

Assessing institutional learning outcomes is one of three components of [CSUMB's holistic alignment framework](#) for supporting student achievement of the [CSUMB Learning Outcomes](#). This web page was created to 1) foster a shared understanding of assessment at CSUMB and 2) share with external audiences an approach they might adapt for cultivating an improvement-focused (as opposed to a compliance-focused) assessment culture at their own institutions. Also see the [Provost's Statement on Principles of Academic Affairs Assessment](#).

Introduction

How can CSUMB better help students be successful as engaged citizens and in their chosen fields through the application of the five core competencies (critical thinking, information literacy, quantitative reasoning, written communication, and oral communication; embodied in CSUMB's [Undergraduate Learning Outcome \(ULO\) 1: Intellectual Skills](#)), personal, professional, and social responsibility (ULO2); integrative knowledge (ULO3); and specialized knowledge (ULO4)? This question has motivated CSUMB's institution-level assessment efforts since they were initiated in 2012. However, the foundations for this work were established decades earlier. In 1997, CSUMB established a Center for Teaching, Learning, Assessment that was prescient in understanding and strengthening the connections among facilitating learning, assessment, and faculty engagement (Driscoll and Wood, 2006).

Connecting assessment to teaching and learning has been the focus of national discussions. Those connections were highlighted in a set of [Liberal Education](#) articles on the assessment movement and in the *Change* article by Sullivan and McConnell (2017), "Big Progress in Authentic Assessment, But by Itself Not Enough." Sullivan and McConnell make those connections explicit by highlighting the results of a study by Condon et. al. (2016) that demonstrated positive impacts on student learning resulting from workshops designed to help faculty (p. 21),

- Explicitly introduce higher-level learning goals involving writing and critical thinking into their courses -- above and beyond disciplinary content learning goals.
- Design and introduce assignments meant to help students improve their skills in those higher-order learning areas and building on the disciplinary learning they also wanted student to gain -- i.e. start with learning goals and create assignment pathways to improve student skills in all of the sub-dimensions of the learning goal.

This recent attention to connections among teaching, learning, and assessment -- and the important role of faculty development -- is highly affirming of the improvement-focused approach to assessment practiced for decades at CSUMB. What follows is the history, current status, and future of institutional outcomes assessment at CSUMB.

Philosophical foundations

Assessment has been core to CSUMB since its founding. The [CSUMB Assessment Plan](#) begins (p. 2), "The California State University, Monterey Bay (CSUMB), opened its doors in 1994 framed by a distinct Vision Statement that, among other things, pledged to 'emphasize careful evaluation and assessment of results and outcomes (CSUMB Vision, 1994).'" Further, for the reasons described in the section below on assessment and academic freedom, assessment of CSUMB's academic programs is faculty-led.

Another important philosophical foundation underlying assessment at CSUMB is that assessment is undertaken primarily for improvement and secondarily for accountability. That is, the institution is accountable by doing assessment that leads to improved student achievement. This paradigm is defined in Douglas Roscoe's 2017 paper, "[Toward an Improvement Paradigm for Academic Quality](#)" and underlies assessment at CSUMB. For years CSUMB has been working to implement the main tenets of the improvement paradigm, including (para. 22) ,

"First, an improvement paradigm would place at the forefront collective conversations about curricula and instruction. Faculty often want to discuss teaching and curricula, but this simply gets pushed off the plate. An improvement paradigm would create spaces where these discussions are required; it would wall off an area on faculty plates crowded with scholarship, teaching, and service demands. Put differently, this is about institutionalizing regular, serious faculty conversations about curricula and instruction. The assessment process, when it functions well, can and does create these conversations—in fact, that is what's most valuable about assessment today."

This philosophical approach was forefront when the Assessment Committee and the Intellectual Skills Assessment Coordinators designed the process for assessing each of the intellectual skills. As noted in CSUMB's 2014 Critical Thinking Assessment Report, "While the large number of faculty involved in this assessment project potentially limited the reliability of the assessment results..., benefits included... increasing the amount of faculty development resulting from the project, and promoting a 'culture of assessment' across campus." This was actualized by intentionally building into each assessment day multiple dedicated times for faculty to share with each other what they were learning from assessing student work. Further, at the end of each day, faculty submitted written reflections on what they were experiencing and learning from the assessment work. Their responses were strongly indicative of an improvement paradigm.

Phase 1 (2014 - 2016): Initial assessments of the ULO1 intellectual skills

Assessment involves generating evidence of student achievement; reflecting on that evidence; bringing faculty together to generate, evaluate, and implement ideas on how to fine-tune or

change practices; gathering more evidence; and repeating the cycle (Suskie, 2018). By forefronting generative discussion and classroom action, CSUMB actualizes Roscoe's (2017) improvement paradigm.

Institution-level assessment of what later became CSUMB's Undergraduate Learning Outcome (ULO) #1: Intellectual skills (critical thinking, information literacy, quantitative reasoning, written communication, and oral communication) was originally called for in the founding [CSUMB Assessment Plan](#). Subsequently, in fall 2013, the newly formed Assessment Committee of the Academic Senate named a Faculty Assessment Coordinator for critical thinking to lead the campus' first institution-level core competency assessment project by leading a team of Faculty Assessment Scholars who received professional development on conducting direct assessments of student work using rubrics.

The following process was implemented for the initial assessment of the five intellectual skills:

- *Initial teaching cooperative*: Invite faculty to participate in a teaching cooperative to study relevant assessment rubrics (including relevant AAC&U VALUE Rubrics) and create a rubric for the CSUMB context. The first teaching cooperative was offered in fall 2012 for critical thinking.
- *Response*: Facilitate a post-assessment teaching cooperative to study assessment results and generate and implement responses.
- *Assessment*: Use the rubric to assess student work randomly sampled from courses across campus.
- *Assessment scholars*: Select Faculty Assessment Scholars to norm student performance expectations, calibrate the rubric using student work, and develop and implement an assessment plan.

Initial assessments of each of the five Intellectual Skills occurred between summer 2014 and winter 2016. In total, over 800 samples of student work from over 150 different courses were scored by 36 faculty representing 16 different programs. Significant conclusions drawn from the assessment process and results include the following:

1. Assignment design appeared to have a significant impact on level of student performance as measured by the rubric. Because assignments were not explicitly aligned to the rubrics, the Assessment Scholars were often not able to determine whether lower-than-expected levels of proficiency were the result of students not being proficient or assignment not being designed to assess the relevant intellectual skill and its different components. This is a common finding among campuses that have engaged in this kind of work and a finding highlighted in the AAC&U's recent report, "[On Solid Ground: VALUE Report 2017](#)."
2. To increase students' ability to apply and demonstrate the Intellectual Skills across campus, the kinds of generative assessment processes implemented on an institutional level needed to also occur at department and program levels.

3. The Assessment Scholars had generally positive responses to the assessment work, including finding the work rewarding and engaging and that it helped them generate ideas on how to improve future work with their own students.
4. It was difficult to distinguish written communication, oral communication, and quantitative reasoning skills from critical thinking and information literacy skills.

In response to these insights, the Intellectual Skills Assessment Coordinators, with initial support from the Intellectual Skills Assessment Scholars, did the following:

1. Created three [integrated rubrics](#) that combine the critical thinking and information literacy criteria with the quantitative reasoning, written communication, and oral communication criteria.
2. Offered support to academic departments on using the [Intellectual Skills Assignment Guides and Integrated Rubrics](#) to enhance student achievement of relevant program-level learning outcomes (referred to at CSUMB as Major Learning Outcomes, or MLOs).
3. Created and facilitated assignment design workshops for faculty using the [Intellectual Skills Assignment Guides and Integrated Rubrics](#).
4. Created three [intellectual skills assignment guides](#) that translated rubric criteria into questions faculty could use to create or modify assignments in ways likely to increase students' ability to apply and demonstrate the intellectual skills.

After piloting the assignment design workshop, in fall 2016, the ULO coordinators reached out to all academic programs with an offer to help enhance student achievement of MLOs using the Intellectual Skills Assignment Guides and Integrated Rubrics and the institution-level assessment processes faculty found so engaging and helpful to their own teaching. This offer was intended to support the newly revised program review manual that placed more emphasis on annual assessments of student learning and explicit alignment to the ULO1 Intellectual Skills. However, an unexpected, but ultimately productive realization that resulted from this effort was that many programs lacked measurable MLOs that could all be assessed over a five-year period. In many cases outcomes were too numerous, too complex, or not measurable (e.g. broader learning goals rather than more specific and measurable learning outcomes). This prompted many programs to engage their faculty in the process of revising their MLOs and distinguishing and connecting broader program learning goals from specific, measurable learning outcomes.

Phase 2 (2017): Integrated assessments of the ULO1 intellectual skills

As departments go through the process of improving their MLOs, the College Faculty Associates for Assessment, who lead the Assessment Committee of the Academic Senate, and the ULO1 Assessment Coordinators completed the following tasks:

1. *Identify assessment points for degree-level proficiency of the ULO1 Intellectual Skills:*
During spring 2017 the College Faculty Associates for Assessment asked departments

to identify where in their curriculum the ULO1 Intellectual Skills are or could be assessed for degree-level proficiency, ideally in the context of an existing MLO.

2. *Complete the 2nd institution-level assessment of the ULO1 Intellectual Skills using the new CSUMB Integrated Rubrics.* During summer 2017, three teams of ULO1 Assessment Scholars (Quantitative Reasoning, Written Communication, and Oral Communication) used the new [integrated rubrics](#) to assess student capstone (i.e. senior-level) work and GE Area A2/3 (Oral & Written Communication, Critical Thinking, & Ethics) and Area B4 (Mathematics) student work. In total, 442 student capstone artifacts and 95 GE student artifacts were assessed by 18 Assessment Scholars.

As with the 2014-2016 assessments, following each day of assessment and after the entire assessment was complete, the Assessment Scholars were asked to reflect on their experiences conducting institution-level assessment. Their reflections provided information not only on how to improve the validity and reliability of assessment results but also what they gained from the experience. A general review of the reflections suggested that, as with the 2014-16 assessment projects, Assessment Scholars found the work rewarding and engaging and it helped them generate ideas on how to improve future work with their own students. This suggests that conducting the assessment was itself an initial step towards “closing the loop” as well as helping to promote a culture of assessment as CSUMB.

In addition to generating ideas on how to improve the integrated rubrics, the 2nd institution-level assessment of the ULO1 Intellectual Skills reiterated the need to identify appropriate and consistent points in the curriculum (both in General Education and the majors) to assess student achievement of the ULO1 Intellectual Skills using authentic student work. It also suggested the need to develop clearer anchors for benchmarks and develop better norming procedures. Addressing these issues should significantly increase validity and reliability of assessment results when the ULO1 Intellectual Skills are next assessed at the institutional level in summer 2019.

Although the limitations of the 2017 assessment results are significant with regard to how accurately they measure student achievement, they nevertheless suggest there are important opportunities for increasing student achievement. This can be accomplished by broadly sharing and discussing assessment results and generating and integrating course-, program-, and institution-level strategies that collectively promote student achievement of the ULO1 Intellectual Skills.

For example, in fall 2017 the ULO1 Assessment Coordinators lead the following:

- Revised the ULO1 integrated rubrics and developed "Thinking Behind the Rubrics" guides to improve the clarity of the rubrics and help faculty gain a stronger shared understanding of the intellectual skills and how to foster student achievement.
- Facilitated [ULO1 threshold concepts workgroups](#) who drafted threshold concepts for each of the intellectual skills to support development of a [pedagogical framework](#) for

helping students achieve and transfer the intellectual skills across multiple courses and contexts.

This work will form the foundation for spring 2018 faculty development programming on teaching for transfer of the intellectual skills to be offered by the ULO1 Coordinators with support from the Center for Teaching, Learning, and Assessment and [Communication Across the Disciplines](#).

Phase 3 (2018): Holistic alignment of the ULO1 intellectual skills

[Holistic alignment](#) refers to the alignment of learning outcomes, assignments, and the facilitation of learning within and between curricular and co-curricular contexts. Building on assessment results and the threshold concepts work described above, in spring 2018 the institution offered two professional development workshops for faculty and staff: [1\) Designing Assignments that Results in Better Student Work](#) and [2\) Crossing Thresholds: Helping Student Apply and Transfer the Intellectual Skills Across Courses and contexts](#). Subsequently, [several faculty learning communities were formed](#) to support the development and delivery of curriculum in GE Area A ([English Language Communication and Critical Thinking](#)) and GE Area B4 ([Mathematics](#)). Faculty participants in these faculty learning communities were trained in [Reading Apprenticeship](#), a well-developed, evidence-based approach to apprenticing students into disciplinary reading, thinking, and problem-solving. While initially focused on holistic alignment within curricular contexts, this work is creating approaches and fostering the development of an assessment culture that over time should help CSUMB promote holistic alignment more broadly, including co-curricular contexts.

Phase 4 (2019): ULO Scholars Program & CSUMB Learning Outcomes

The broad, institution-level assessments of ULO1 provided valuable information about the alignment of course assignments to broad institution-level learning outcomes and resulted in the creation of tools that are being used to improve the facilitation and assessment of student learning within areas of general education and degree programs. Further, the initial ULO1 work also created processes and fostered an improvement-focused (rather than compliance-focused) assessment culture that are advancing assessment and student achievement of CSUMB's remaining ULOs. The next and current phase of development consists of two parallel processes. First, the [ULO Scholars Program](#) formed faculty teams to study student work to advance [holistic alignment](#) of all ULOs. Second, the institution formed a cross-divisional committee with representatives from Student Affairs and Academic Affairs to initiate development and assessment of co-curricular learning outcomes (CCLOs). Also, a different committee was formed to develop and assess graduate level learning outcomes (GLOs). These three sets of institution-level outcomes (ULO, CCLO, and GLO) comprise the [CSUMB Learning Outcomes](#).

Frequently asked questions

How do the integrated rubrics relate to expectations for student performance?

CSUMB's [ULO1 Integrated Rubrics](#) are modeled after the [AAC&U VALUE Rubrics](#). Like the AAC&U VALUE Rubrics (see [On Solid Ground: VALUE Report 2017](#), pg. 35), the CSUMB Assessment Committee has set the level 3 ("Proficient") descriptors for all components of the integrated rubrics as the minimum expectation for graduation. Level 4 ("Advanced") rubric descriptors are aspirational expectations all students should strive to achieve.

Do programs have to assess all the ULO Intellectual Skills in addition to each of their MLOs?

Ideally not. Most or all of the intellectual skills should already be explicitly or implicitly embedded in existing Major Learning Outcomes (MLOs). That is to say, rather than creating a new MLO to address critical thinking, information literacy, and written communication, most programs should be able to identify at least one MLO for which all three of those intellectual skills are needed to successfully demonstrate degree-level competency for the MLO. Integration of oral communication and quantitative reasoning may require special attention and modification of existing MLOs, but that can almost always be accomplished in ways that strengthen students' ability to acquire and demonstrate degree-level proficiency in existing MLOs without having to create new MLOs. CSUMB's Intellectual Skills Assessment Coordinators are always available for consultations on how to efficiently and effectively integrate any of the intellectual skills into existing MLOs. Feel free to contact any of them for advice:

- Critical Thinking: Swarup Wood
- Oral Communication: Shar Gregg
- Written Communication: Ondine Gage
- Quantitative Reasoning: Judith Canner
- Information Literacy: Sarah Dahlen

What is the relationship between assessment and academic freedom?

Faculty are often, and reasonably, concerned about potential negative influences of assessment on academic freedom. This is an active topic of conversation in the assessment community and beyond. In the National Institute for Learning Outcomes Assessment (NILOA) paper, ["Assessment and Academic Freedom, In Concert, not Conflict,"](#) Cain (2014), writes,

"If institutional requirements are outside of faculty control and don't allow flexibility for disciplinary differences, faculty rights can be abrogated. Yet this need not be the case. Indeed, among the most important organizations staking claims for faculty rights, including academic freedom, are the AAUP, the American Federation of Teachers (AFT), and the National Education Association (NEA). In a recent NILOA Occasional Paper (Gold, Rhoades, Smith, & Kuh, 2011), leaders of all three organizations argued that

assessment in and of itself is consistent with their organizations' values when undertaken appropriately."

Cain (2014) writes further,

"Assessment experts, whether from the faculty or not, are important. They can bring knowledge, help educate faculty, coordinate institution-wide efforts, and help provide the context and framing that make data useful. At the same time, to protect the faculty's academic freedom, the outcomes defined, plans designed, and practices enacted must be under faculty control. As the former leaders of the three largest faculty unions have all argued, learning outcomes assessment itself is not a threat to academic freedom but in practice, when removed from faculty control, it surely can be (Gold et al., 2011)."

At the same time, it is important to note that academic freedom has limits, particularly when it comes to fulfilling professional obligations to support student achievement of core academic skills, such as critical thinking. Cain (2014) writes,

"Educating stakeholders about [academic freedom] should include not only the rights of faculty but also the negotiated limits of academic freedom—because academic freedom has never meant “anything goes.” Moreover, in shared curricular decisions, the rights of the faculty as a group can in some circumstances take precedence over the rights of individual faculty (AAUP, 2013) [Also see [AAUP's Statement on The Freedom to Teach](#)]."

Precisely because of these concerns, CSUMB has taken steps needed to ensure assessment is under faculty control and preserve academic freedom. First and foremost, articulation of all learning outcomes, whether at the course, program, or institutional level, is completely under faculty control. Assessment of curricular student learning is under the purview of the Assessment Committee of the Academic Senate, which is led by the Faculty Associates for Assessment from each college. Further, assessment of the CSUMB Intellectual Skills is led by a team of five faculty Intellectual Skills Assessment Coordinators who work with faculty teams to conduct assessments of student achievement and develop appropriate “closing the loop” responses. That is to say, while individual faculty are required teach to and assess student achievement of learning outcomes collaboratively developed by the faculty and assigned to their courses, they maintain the right to decide *how* to teach and assess student achievement.

Is student consent required to use their work for institution-level assessment?

No. Program- and institution-level assessment of student achievement is classified by the Federal Government as a Quality Improvement Activity (QIA) and CSUMB's Committee for the Protection of Human Subjects (CPHS) conforms to the guidance provided by [Office of Human Research Protections OHRP regarding QIA](#). The following is from the OHRP Quality Improvement Activity FAQs webpage:

"Do the HHS regulations for the protection of human subjects in research (45 CFR part 46) apply to quality improvement activities conducted by one or more institutions whose purposes are limited to: (a) implementing a practice to improve the quality of patient care, and (b) collecting patient or provider data regarding the implementation of the practice for clinical, practical, or administrative purposes?

"No, such activities do not satisfy the definition of "research" under [45 CFR 46.102\(d\)](#), which is "...a systematic investigation, including research development, testing and evaluation, designed to develop or contribute to generalizable knowledge..." Therefore the HHS regulations for the protection of human subjects do not apply to such quality improvement activities, and there is no requirement under these regulations for such activities to undergo review by an IRB, or for these activities to be conducted with provider or patient informed consent."

However, so students are aware of how their work may be used, faculty should consider including the following statement approved by the Senate Assessment Committee in their syllabus:

"CSUMB is committed to providing excellent and innovative curricula and educational opportunities to its students. To help us maintain quality academic offerings and to conform to institutional and professional accreditation requirements, the University and its programs regularly evaluate student work to assess student achievement of learning outcomes. CSUMB obtains, evaluates, and retains samples of student work from designated assignments in representative courses. This work includes, but is not limited to, papers, exams, creative works, recordings of oral presentations, or portfolios developed and submitted in courses or to satisfy the requirements for degree programs. Instructors will inform students which assignments will be designated for assessment purposes. Instructor and student names will not appear in any assessment results and assessment results will have no impact on student grades, instructor evaluations, or instructor employment."

Will institution-level assessment be used to evaluate individual faculty?

No. Descriptions of best assessment practices consistently emphasize the importance of separating evaluation of students and faculty from assessing program and institutional effectiveness. The purpose of program- and institution-level assessment of student achievement is to improve the ability of programs and the institution to support student learning, not to evaluate individual students or faculty. This separation is critical for ensuring the integrity of assessment processes. As noted above, when using student work for assessment, every effort is made to maintain the anonymity of both students and faculty. For example, for assignment guidelines and written work, student and faculty names are always removed. However, sometimes maintaining anonymity is difficult (e.g. if there is only a single course and instructor for a particular course category and for oral presentation). Further, data presented in institution-level assessment reports are always presented in aggregate without course or

department identifiers. Further, the [CSUMB Provost's Statement on Principles of Academic Affairs Assessment](#) notes that,

"[. . .]assessment results will never be used for any faculty, staff, or student evaluation. Further, to the extent possible, student and instructor names will be removed from all student work prior to assessment. Student and instructor names will never be published in assessment reports or in any other form that could reflect on the performance of an individual faculty member or student."

Is this kind assessment work part of a move towards standardized testing?

No. It is actually the opposite. As explained in the article, "[The VALUE of Learning: Meaningful Assessment on the Rise](#)" by Rhodes (2017), a primary goal of the AAC&U VALUE project, which has informed to establish an alternative to standardized testing and avoid negative consequences experienced in response to the federal No Child Left Behind Act. In particular, AAC&U's assessment work was guided by the following principles:

1. The measurement of student success should be multifaceted.
2. Examining the actual work students produce in relation to their education yields the best evidence of how well educators and students are doing.
3. Education providers have valuable expertise and are central to improving student achievement.
4. Expected learning outcomes should reflect broad consensus among educators and employers.

2018 AAC&U and WSCUC ARC presentations

CSUMB's [intellectual skills assignment guides, rubrics, and rubric guides](#); how they were developed; and the results of a faculty engagement study were shared at the 2018 Association of American Colleges & Universities Annual Meeting in Washington D.C. and at the 2018 WSCUC Academic Resources Conference 2018 Annual Meeting in San Francisco. In addition, foundational work on assessment of co-curricular learning in the area of health and wellness was also shared at the 2018 WSCUC Academic Resources Conference.

- [Using Integrated VALUE Rubrics to Engage All Faculty in Reflective Assessment that Improves Teaching and Learning](#), 2018 AAC&U 2018 Annual Meeting
- [Engaging all faculty in reflective, institutional assessment for improving teaching and learning of the core competencies](#), 2018 WSCUC Academic Resources Conference
- [Fostering Institutional Change to Support Holistic Wellness, Learning, and Engagement \(co-curricular learning\)](#), 2018 WSCUC Academic Resources Conference

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