Chapter 11
Assessment of Student Learning Outcomes in Distance Education

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ABSTRACT

Student Learning Outcomes (SLOs) are becoming the norm for all types of accreditation decisions by regional and specialized agencies. SLOs and student assessment norms and best practices are described, as well as a path to establish SLOs. Analyzing and using the data collected about student assessment to enrich student learning is also described. Special attention is given to LIS instruction, but several comparisons to other disciplines are also made.

INTRODUCTION

The first decade of the 21st Century has witnessed an exponential increase in the number of higher-education students participating in distance education initiatives through the medium of online courses. A survey conducted by the National Center for Educational Statistics reported in 2000-2001 that 56% of community colleges and four-year degree-granting institutions offered some type of distance learning and 90% of those institutions delivered at least some of these classes completely online (D'Orsie & Day, 2006). By Fall 2007, 3.9 million students were taking at least one online class, and 30% of the institutions that offered educational degrees (both undergraduate and graduate) had some components of their programs offered strictly online (Allen & Seaman, 2008). The 2010 *Sloan Survey of Online Learning* revealed that enrollment in online programs had risen to approximately 5.6 million, up by about a million from only a year earlier (Allen & Seaman, 2010). For many institutions, the only growth in enrollment is in their online programs; an increasing number of institutions require or encourage undergraduates to include some online courses as part of their on-campus experience. As

distance education has become a way of life for most colleges and universities, it is natural that assessment of student learning outcomes in this 'brave new world' educational environment has become a matter of great importance in determining the quality of their programs.
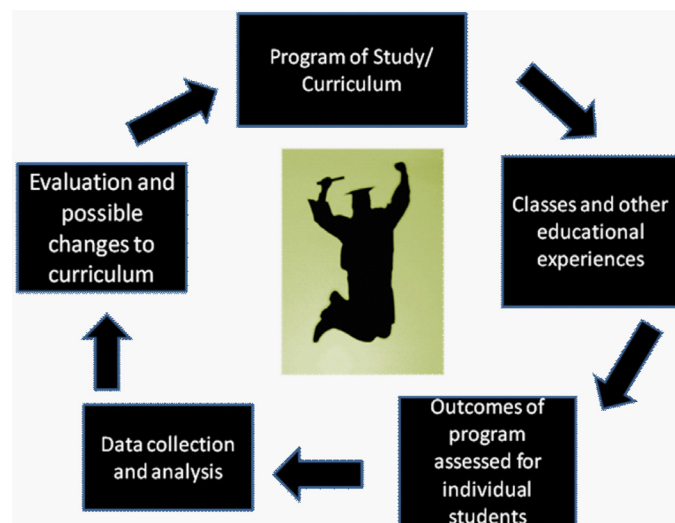
OUTCOMES ASSESSMENT

The concept of outcomes assessment has been in the literature beginning with Bloom's *Taxonomy* in the 50s, but it was only in the mid-90s that student learning outcomes began to be tied to accountability of institutions and programs. Before 1960, higher-education planning was rarely based on systematic, cyclical, useful evaluation of an institution's programs. Only after 1960 did strategic planning and management spread through academe, and educators began discussing a systems approach to learning (Carey, Perrault, & Gregory, 2001). A critical systems concept included by these instructional designers was the feedback loop; that is, program performance could be improved upon by collecting performance data and using it to refine the curriculum (Dick & Carey, 1978).

By the next decade, a trend by accrediting bodies to more closely examine and measure outcomes rather than only inputs was apparent. That is, a shift to examine the results of student learning processes rather than just applicable statistical factors (e.g., the number of faculty, the number of students per class and other similar metrics) was underway (Kells,1995). Today, higher education literature explicitly indicates that the process of assessing student learning, student development, and program outcomes is essential to improving the health and vitality of academic programs generally (Perrault, Gregory, & Carey, 2002).

Most outcomes-based models, particularly in professional fields, include an active approach to engaging in conceptual learning. This active learning methodology aligns the learning process specifically with what the learner is expected to do with the information learned from the experience(see Figure1), and how the learner can transfer specific learning elements to other situations. (Little, Badway, & Hargis, 2008).

An important, indeed natural, aspect of the systems approach to student learning outcomes is the concept of continuous improvement:

Figure 1. Outcomes-Based Model of Student Learning

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