

Memorandum

Date: January 4, 2007

To: Leon Richards
Acting Chancellor

From: Frank Abou-Sayf 
Director

Subject: **On Course SLOs at the College**

Every rational institution makes major changes only when these changes lead to added value for the institution. The efforts of the SLO Committee at the College during the last 3 years are boiling down to a recommendation for a major change. I am willing to endorse it wholeheartedly if it leads to value added for the College.

Course SLOs come in different forms. One form is specific competencies, which we already have. I would like to emphasize that specific competencies are a legitimate form of SLOs.

A couple of months ago, I attended Louise's presentation about the status of course SLOs at the college. I learned from this session that the SLO Committee is recommending the use of an arbitrary (by Louise's admission) form of course SLOs: broad statements; so broad in fact that, according to the committee, some courses will require as few as one SLO. I also learned that, very often, these broad statements cannot be assessed during the course where they belong; rather, one will have to wait for the student's performance in a subsequent course, or even later, to assess his/her performance on the target course. And I was also told that, in some cases, it is possible to have the new broad statements alongside the current specific competencies. According to these definitions, this new type of SLOs not only presents no value added, but lead to serious challenges and concerns.

At Louise's recommendation, I followed this session up by attending another presentation by four instructors who have transformed their teaching approach, allegedly based on the new SLOs. This second session was recommended because it was going to show vividly the advantages of the new SLOs over the current ones. My observations during this second session led me to conclude that the transformation of the four courses was not impacted by any form of SLO, broad or specific.

One of my first concerns relates to how much thought was given to the assessment challenges that this type of SLOs pose: not only are broad statements complicated to assess, but having to wait in some cases until you obtain a measure of the student's performance past the course time

is problematic to say the least. I was told by one instructor involved in the process that the new SLOs will rely heavily on self-assessment by the student. Is this the direction that this college is going toward? The only way to avoid an erosion of the rigor of the student assessment process with these broad statements is to deconstruct each broad SLO into its irreducible representations (that is, the current specific competencies) and to measure each one separately, which is what instructors are supposed to be doing now without ever looking at the new broad SLOs. In fact, the more I think about it the more I wonder whether these new broad statements are not in fact **program** SLOs rather than course SLOs. This difference in definition will address several – perhaps most – pending issues, notably the assessment challenge: program SLOs are vague by definition and not necessarily measurable at the end of a specific course.

Now let's look at another aspect: implementation. I was told at the session that it is simple for all instructors to formulate the new broad SLOs. I don't believe it is so. We all know that there is a difference between fact and perception: even if in the eyes of some of us it appears easy to compose these new SLOs, the perception by most faculty members is that it is not; certainly, the lack of interest in this additional layer of work is not going to help. Sadly, rather than attempting to alleviate the anxiety resulting from this new task, we are ensuring that it appears even more complicated than it actually is, by associating it with such terms as Bloom's Taxonomy of Educational Objectives and active and passive verb lists and the like.

Then there is the issue of unintended consequences. Broad statements as SLOs will prevent the College from engaging in activities that rely on the specificity of the current competencies. An example is the new prerequisite approach, which is based on identifying competencies as avenues to identifying courses or parts thereof. The new broad statements will negate the use of this approach. I wonder how many other unintended consequences will result from this change.

Finally, if this college's administration wishes to change the way we do business, it is incumbent upon us to prove that there is value added, or at least, that the new way of doing business works. The burden of proof is on us and, clearly, we have done nothing of that. This absence of validation leads to a loss of faculty support but yet does not deter us from pushing for the assessment of faculty based on these new SLOs and wanting to add them as requirements to hire new faculty.

I don't know whose prerogative it is to change one form of SLOs to the other: administration or faculty. But what I know is that it is not prudent of Louise to endorse the new SLOs as she has, because now, the perception by the college is that this is the administration's position, true or not. To my knowledge, we as administration have not finalized our position on this matter. Unfortunately, as your director of assessment, I cannot endorse the new broad SLOs because, as I explained, (a) they are not needed, (b) we have not proved that they are an improvement over the status quo, and (c) in my opinion they lead to serious assessment issues that may undermine our integrity as an institution. But most importantly, I am convinced that, (d) even if we as the college administration decide to adopt these new vague SLOs, we will not succeed in

implementing them due to faculty resistance that will be strengthened by the perception that they are administration-imposed or at least administration-endorsed.

My former recommendations stand: abandon this new unneeded direction to change course SLOs from specific statements to broad ones, and instead concentrate our efforts on fine-tuning the competencies that we currently have in terms of both clarity and assessment, as well in the formulation of program, department and college SLOs the form of which we all agree about. And for heaven's sake, let's stop wasting our resources on assigned time for faculty to continue tinkering with course SLOs.

I wrote an official memo about my position on SLOs in June. It is posted on the IR web page, and it is as timely today as it was when I wrote it. I already distributed it to you all.

Thanks