

Student Learning Outcomes: Exploring Co-curricular Activities

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Background

Throughout the 2000s, the University of Minnesota central administrators and staff worked together in the Council of Enhancing Student Learning. The council's goal was to develop Student Learning Outcomes (SLOs) that would define what each student should be able to do by the time they receive their bachelor's degree. SLOs are measurable outcomes that are used to improve areas in the curriculum. By the time you graduate from the University of Minnesota-Twin Cities, you are expected to identify, define, and solve problems. Graduates should locate and critically evaluate information. They should master a body of knowledge and a mode of inquiry as well as understand diverse philosophies and cultures within and across societies. Students should communicate effectively, understand the role of creativity, innovation, discovery, and expression across disciplines. Finally, they should have acquire skills for effective citizenship and life-long learning.

Program evaluation allows institutions to grow, enhance programs and identify gaps. Ruhland and Brewer (2001) argue that learning outcomes "should not only demonstrate what students know, but should also capture the changes that occur in their cognitive and affective development as a result of their college experiences." Thus, an effective learning outcomes needs significant understanding of how to best relate the course content to our types of students and how to make the course meaningful to our student needs and life experiences. Currently the program evaluation method to measure

SLOs used by the College of Education and Human Development (CEHD) is a survey. The survey offers a scale from strongly disagree to strongly agree, but it does not offer a space to explain the reasons behind the answer. The scale does not ask questions that involve activities outside the classroom experience. The scales are limited because they only focus on traditional classroom setting, and do not offer a bigger picture of how students obtain those learning outcomes throughout their academic experience. Having a bigger picture will help the University plan individual courses, design syllabi, and construct learning activities. Professors will also be able to accurately assess student learning that occurs beyond the classroom.

The purpose of this research project will be to determine whether the SLO's are achieved solely within the confines of the classroom or are achieved through interaction and overlapping of curricular activity in student groups. The research will be focusing on last year students in the majors of kinesiology and family social science. Most kinesiology majors are doing extracurricular activities where they are learning skills that are relevant to these learning outcomes. Likewise most students that choose family social science as their major are require to have experiential learning opportunities, so they have both classroom experience and outside of class experience. For example, I did learn a lot from taking public speaking last semester. However, the learning was not that effective since I was mostly getting tested or speaking in front of my peers. Being involve in students groups this semester and applying those public speaking skills learned in class increased my public speaking skills enormously. This is best explained by Eyler and Giles (1999):

“A professor also reflected that we can give them all the book knowledge they want, but if they can't use it when they leave here, what have we given them. Students reported that service learning provided unique and unexpected opportunities for them to practice applying their newly acquired academic knowledge to complex real-world situations (Eyler & Giles, 1999).”

Methods

In order to achieve my research goal, I conducted a focus group interview. Having a focus group helped me explore students' knowledge and experiences and examined not only what they thought, but how and why they thought that way. It is a means of evaluating the current Student Learning Outcomes (SLO's). In addition, the research format was open ended discussion. The focus group interview included two female students, one of them is African American and the other is Caucasian. Both students were juniors majoring in Kinesiology. Questions asked during the interview included.

1. What activities are you involved in outside the classroom? For example, volunteering, internships, student groups, work, Greek Life etc?
2. Have you increased your ability in any of the SLO's by participating on the activities you identified with? What activities? Which skills? Can you give me an example?
3. Which skills do you feel you have not developed or strengthened? Why?
4. Where do you feel you gained most of these skills in class, extracurricular activities or both?

In order to keep record of the interview I first recorded it and then transcribed it after. The interview lasted for 45 minutes. Information was interpreted by analyzing the transcripts of what the student said and looked for similar responses, how participants understand their experiences, and what they attributed their strengths to.

Results

What activities are you involved in outside the classroom? For example, volunteering, internships, student groups, work, Greek Life etc?

Student one volunteers at the children's hospital and works at the CEHD Trio programs.

Student two works at the Recreational and Wellness Center. She is part of the Greek life, and volunteers at a hospital in Minneapolis.

Have you increased your ability in any of the SLO's by participating on the activities you identified with? What activities? Which skills? Can you give me an example?

During the interview, the students expressed that they did increase their ability in the following SLO's: Identifying, defining, and solve problems; locating and critically evaluating information; communicating effectively; and acquiring skills for effective citizenship and life-long learning. By volunteering in the community, working on campus, and being part of students groups here on campus, these students stated that they were able to gain the learning outcomes listed above. In time of conflict at work or on a student board, they were able to identify what the problem was and come up with different ways to solve it. They also stated that learning to communicate effectively is something you learn outside of class by communicating with your peers or other people in your community.

Which skills do you feel you have not developed or strengthened? Why?

Understanding diverse philosophies and cultures within and across societies; and understanding the role of creativity, innovation, discovery, and expression across disciplines were SLOs that these students felt like they did not develop. One of the students stated that in class, everything is based on what the teacher says or does. There is

no room for the students to come up with their new ideas especially in kinesiology courses.

Where do you feel you gained most of these skills in class, extracurricular activities or both?

The focus group stated that most of the skills they gained are from a combination of what they obtained from their courses along with what they learned from their extracurricular activities. One student gave an example that in class you usually do presentation to learn how to speak in front of people. However, you develop those public speaking skills more by using them beyond the classroom. If you are part of a student board, you usually speak in front of the general members and you do presentations. You get to apply the skills you learn in class outside of class.

Discussion

The results show that students are indeed gaining some of these learning outcomes in class. One of the students expressed that learning how to locate and critically evaluate information is something you learn in class. In some classes, you write research papers and you usually use online data or go to the library to find information. You have to be able to evaluate that information, how old is the information, is it a reliable source, does the author/website have credibility?

However both students stated that they do not understand diverse philosophies and cultures within and across societies. In their current major, they felt everything was based upon a curriculum that is planned out in a syllabus that is concurrent with the course text. There were not many opportunities for the students to learn about other cultures in relation to their Kinesiology major.

Another weakness the students pointed out was that they lack the skills to understand the

role of creativity, innovation, discovery, and expression across disciplines. They expressed that everything in class was based on what the professors teaches and what is in the textbook. On exams, they are expected to replicate what they are taught, so they felt that there was no room for creativity, innovation, discovery, and expressions. One student stated that service learning outcomes could be incorporated to the academic learning which could help students understand and apply the information they learned in class. Connecting specific courses to a co-curricular activities can make the information that was presented in class more helpful and relevant because they could apply skills learned in class outside of class. It can allow students to think critically and logically, and teaches them how to get into real life.

These two learning outcomes are expressed outside of the classroom and in the students' communities. For example, the Kinesiology major and other classes the students have taken lacks cultural pedagogy. This term refers to the incorporation of the student's world inside the classroom, in which they utilize the students' cultural experiences as a learning curve (Lynch, 2012). For example, Kinesiology focuses on the science of the body and bodily movements, but lacks cultural pedagogy because it does not discuss issues relevant to specific ethnic groups. Therefore, students lose the opportunity to discover and express their community issues, by joining the two concepts and learning how their major ties in with other cultures and philosophies.

References

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