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A Case Study in Meaningful Assessment of an Interdisciplinary Cultural Competency Requirement

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Abstract:

In an institution where assessment was viewed as meaningless box-checking for the purpose of accreditation, a new reflective assessment practice changed 15 faculty members' perception of assessment in a single semester. Piloted with an interdisciplinary graduation requirement for Cultural Competency, the new assessment practice became a powerful tool for closing the loop in which participating faculty analyzed evidence to make improvements for student learning. This article provides a detailed history of the inception and development of that practice and evidence of faculty appreciation for a new four-question protocol.

Keywords: *Meaningful Assessment, Student Success, Faculty Engagement, Inclusive Excellence, Teaching and Learning*

Introduction

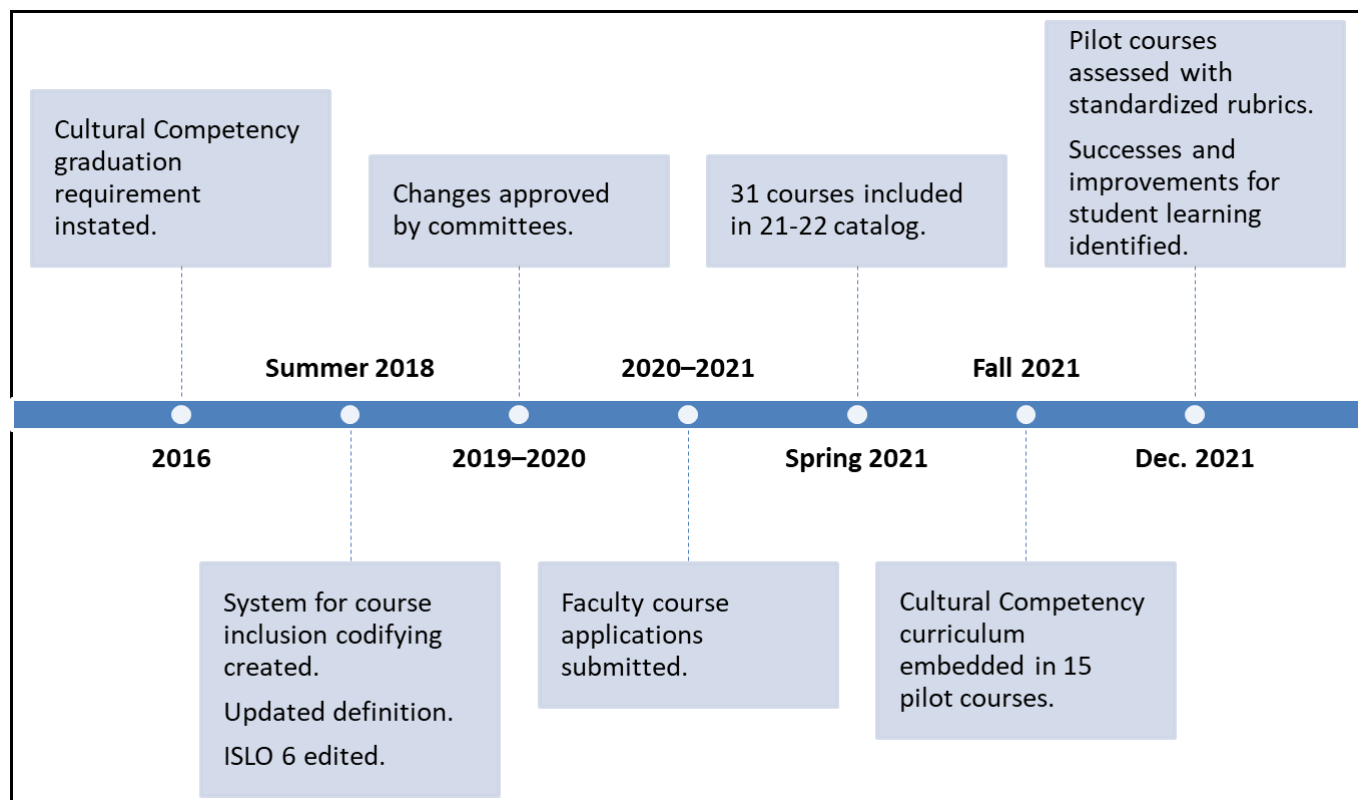
As documented in the Grand Challenges in Assessment project (Singer-Freeman & Robinson, 2020), assessment of student learning outcomes is challenging in a climate where faculty view assessment as box-checking and not integral to pedagogical improvement. This case study examines these challenges and offers evidence that demonstrates a shift in faculty perception of assessment from being a burdensome accreditation requirement to being a useful tool for ongoing improvement of student learning in their courses.

In 2016, a community college with approximately 5000 full-time students instated a Cultural Competency graduation requirement to be fulfilled by designated cultural competency courses offered through multiple disciplines. The college went through a multi-year process to institutionalize the requirement. The process included refining the list of designated courses, mapping courses and outcomes, redefining the related institutional student learning outcome (ISLO), and finally, developing

a data informed, reflective ISLO assessment strategy. This paper provides a detailed description of the institution’s methods, culminating with the establishment of meaningful, ongoing assessment of student gains in Cultural Competency. Figure 1 shows a timeline of the steps taken to put this graduation requirement in place and transform the use of assessment from demonstrating compliance to guiding learning improvement.

Figure 1

Cultural Competency Graduation Requirement Implementation Timeline



The Inception of the Cultural Competency Graduation Requirement

In 2016, the first year of the Cultural Competency requirement, the college did not have a clear definition of Cultural Competency. The catalog description was vague and stated that, “the goal is to increase student understanding of the nature and meaning of human and global diversity by studying cultural experiences of marginalized groups, studying characteristics of cultural groups outside of Europe and the U.S., and learning the implications of global interdependence.” The ISLOs were equally vague and unmeasurable as shown in Figure 2. For example, ISLO 6.2 (appreciate differing perspectives or worldviews) and ISLO 6.3 (develop cultural competency) contain subjective verbs that are challenging to norm and measure.

Figure 2

2016 Institutional Learning Outcomes Related to Cultural Competency

6.1. Recognize diverse viewpoints, skills, backgrounds, and abilities as they influence collective thinking and action.	6.2. Appreciate differing perspectives or worldviews.	6.3. Develop cultural competency.	6.4. Recognize how differing levels of privilege shape life experiences.	6.5. Engage and work with diverse others.
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Starting in Summer 2016, two pioneering faculty selected courses designated to meet the Cultural Competency requirement using statewide descriptions of lower-division courses offered at the college. Soon after, faculty requested the creation of a course inclusion protocol that would guide decisions to add or remove courses from the designated list. Two years later, the department chairs of Social and Behavioral Sciences undertook a summer project to create such a system. Simultaneously, a new assessment director was mapping course learning outcomes to institutional learning outcomes. This was the entry point to examine the mapping of courses on the Cultural Competency list to the Institutional Student Learning Outcome (ISLO) for Global and Diversity Learning (the institutional outcome most relevant to the Cultural Competency graduation requirement). Discrepancies in the outcome mapping to the cultural competency course list were discovered; many courses that were on the list did not map to the ISLO and some courses that did map to the ISLO were not on the list. It was also discovered that the ISLO for Global and Diversity Learning was vague and not measurable. Accordingly, the summer project unexpectedly expanded beyond codifying course inclusion. Work began to clarify the language of the ISLO and to ensure that the definition of Cultural Competency and the rationale for the graduation requirement were well aligned.

The department chairs, who were faculty members teaching in Sociology and Anthropology, studied the existing scholarship on culture and marginalization. They found that cultural groups generally share a core set of beliefs, patterns of behavior, and values and may share similar characteristics such as race, ethnicity, language, gender, religious beliefs, or sexual identity (Gilbert et al., 2007). Cultural groups outside of Europe and the United States exist within cultural, political, and geographical regions that lie outside of the political boundaries that identify with the European continent or the political boundaries of the United States. A marginalized group is a cultural group whose members experience an absence of economic resources and power. Marginalized groups are often marked by a lack of political rights and recognition. Often, these groups are excluded from full integration into all sectors of the labor market, thereby missing out on one of the basic factors leading to full inclusion (Young, 2002). Examples of marginalized groups include women, people of color, Native Americans, lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer individuals (LGBTQ), non-native English speakers, immigrants, refugees, members of non-Christian religions, and individuals living with physical, emotional, mental, or learning disabilities (Kivel, 2020).

Given a broader definition of marginalized groups, the department chairs determined that to obtain mastery in Cultural Competency, it was not sufficient for students to simply study cultural groups

outside of Europe and the United States, which was the previous scope of courses designated to teach Cultural Competency. An understanding of power, privilege, and marginalization was essential for students to achieve competency. This expectation is reflected in the American Association of Colleges and Universities rubrics for both Global Learning and Intercultural Knowledge and Competence (VALUE Rubrics, 2022), which were influential in college-wide agreement to reshape the Global and Diversity Learning ISLO and the definition of Cultural Competency. After college-wide faculty discussions, an internal definition for the college was developed and proposed to the appropriate shared governance channels including the Curriculum Committee, Academic Council, and College Council. Through shared governance vetting and approval in 2018 and 2019, the updated definition of Cultural Competency (see below) and newly aligned ISLO (see Figure 3) were approved. Through research, shared governance, and a centering of student success, the work moved forward despite challenges that ranged from opposition to and discomfort with the amended cultural competency definition to the explicit mention of “marginalization” in the ISLOs. Inviting faculty to dialogue about their resistance and support throughout the process was integral to evolution of this graduation requirement and assessing the related outcomes.

New Definition of Cultural Competency. The intention of this requirement is to emphasize the development of critical thinking, analytical skills, and intercultural communication necessary for living in a diverse society. By satisfying this requirement, students will study race, class, gender, ethnicity, disability, age, sexuality, nationality, and religion in the context of power, privilege, and marginalization. Equity and inclusion are pillars of the college, and it is expected that all students recognize and understand multiple cultural frameworks, values, and norms. One of the most important elements in the language of cultural competency, along with power and privilege, is the idea of marginalization. Marginalization is often understood as both a current condition and a dynamic process (Baah, 2019). As a condition, it excludes individuals or groups from participating fully in society. As a multidimensional and dynamic process, it channels the social relations and organizational barriers that block the attainment of livelihoods, human development, and equal citizenship. Essentially, marginalization describes both a process and a condition that prevents individuals or groups from full participation in social, economic, and political life-including education, private property, economic opportunity, social safety nets, infrastructure, language, protection from violence, food security, health, and sanitation. It derives from exclusionary relationships based on power. Further, to be marginalized is to have a sense that one does not belong and, in so doing, to feel that one is neither a valued member of a community and able to make a valuable contribution within that community nor able to access the range of services and/or opportunities open to others (Mowat, 2015).

Designating and Mapping Courses for Cultural Competency

In 2020, the next step in curricular implementation was adopting a Cultural Competency course application process. The selection criteria were based on a rubric developed by the subcommittee requiring at least two course learning outcomes to map to two of the institutional learning outcomes

(see Appendix A). A subcommittee of the Curriculum Committee reviewed approximately 50 course applications, with 31 being approved for inclusion in the Academic Catalog.

Figure 3

2019-present ISLOs related to Cultural Competency (Institution Academic Catalog, 2021)

ISLO 6. Recognizing and supporting diversity				
6.1. Identify intercultural experience from the perspectives of self and more than one worldview, including the elements important to members of another culture in relation to its history, values, politics, communication styles, economy or beliefs and practices.	6.2. Describe marginalization on both as a process and a condition drawing from multiple viewpoints and perspectives.	6.3. Explain the complexities of multiple theories of race, class, gender, ethnicity, disability, age, sexuality, nationality and/or religion.	6.4. Analyze how differing levels of power and privilege shape life experiences in relation to belonging, exclusion, community engagement and full participation in society and its services.	6.5. Develop and implement skills that contribute to diverse, equitable and inclusive environments.

Building Meaningful Assessment in Courses

Anticipating faculty reluctance to participate in assessment, the subcommittee, comprised of faculty and administrators, developed the course level assessment protocol in a manner that adopted best practices and leveraged faculty expertise in their existing course design through embedded assessment to minimize additional work. For this first iteration of the assessment, faculty were required to select at least one artifact for at least one learning outcome. Using a clear assessment protocol with well-defined learning outcomes ensured the institution could demonstrate that the student experience was rich and consistent regardless of which Cultural Competency course a student took. Assessment also ensured the courses on the Cultural Competency course list delivered the content for this ISLO.

Overview of Pilot Semester

In Fall 2021, 15 courses piloted the new assessment protocol. Faculty from these courses participated in a cohort-based summer training and met regularly during Fall 2021. The training consisted of course mapping to help faculty select the most appropriate artifact to demonstrate student learning for the Cultural Competency ISLO included on the course application. The Fall 2021 training instructed faculty in using the institution’s Learning Management System (LMS), Canvas, to collect course level data using Learning Mastery rubrics that could be applied to any assignment. This enabled faculty to assess a variety of assignments across a range of courses for the same ISLO using the same VALUE Rubric (AAC&U VALUE Rubrics, 2022). Faculty were instrumental in selecting the VALUE Rubrics that best aligned to the sub-competency in their course and in their discipline. For example, the Spanish faculty

thought the VALUE Rubric for Intercultural Knowledge and Competence best assessed ISLO 6.5. That rubric is now used across all Spanish Cultural Competency courses to assess ISLO 6.5. The other four subsets of the ISLO aligned with the state's department of higher education rubrics to assess Global and Diversity Learning, which were based on the AAC&U VALUE Rubrics as well.

Initial Assessment Findings

Faculty teaching pilot courses were instructed to assess one of the two ISLO sub-outcomes listed on their course application form. Application forms were accessible for reference through the Cultural Competency LMS course shell in the module that was set up for each Cultural Competency course. The versatility of leveraging the LMS with easy-to-use, clickable rubrics proved exciting for faculty who previously did not see the value in assessment. This protocol was embedded in their course and was not additive. Removing additional work for the sake of assessment was a positive first step in the cultural shift with faculty. The second, was the use of a short reporting form to assess student learning that faculty completed after the collection of their data in the LMS. This protocol shifted faculty perception of assessment towards evidence-informed pedagogical improvement with attention to student learning outcomes. For post-semester reporting, faculty answered the following Reflective Questions, adapted from the Flaherty (2012) assessment short form:

1. Assessment Evidence: What information/evidence/data did you gather to inform you about student learning for the outcome you planned to assess? What was your benchmark/expectation for the data (e.g., average of "developing" mastery level for a 100-level course)?
2. Discoveries/conclusions: What did you discover? What were your conclusions?
3. Planned improvements and changes: What do you plan to do the same and differently based on your discoveries about your students and their learning?
4. Resources: What support or resources do you need to make your plans happen?

Summaries and examples of typical responses to each question and improvement plans are described below.

Reflection Question 1 - Assessment Evidence. Evidence from a variety of student artifacts in the pilot courses was reviewed to determine if learning outcomes were achieved. Reflections, essays, movie reviews and other assignments were evaluated with a standardized grading rubric for the Cultural Competency outcomes. Benchmarks of average rubric scores were set by faculty. Most faculty expected their students to achieve a score of 3 out of 4, with 4 representing exceptional work. Faculty described the evidence and benchmark achievements of their students, as shown in the following example:

Two essays were assessed. One analytical reflection essay on the book 'Salmon and Acorns Feed My People' by Kari-Marie Norgaard for ISLO 6.1; and a final environmental justice case study for ISLO 6.2. My expectation was that all students would at least meet the "accomplished" score within the CC rubric.

Based on eleven assessment report responses, outcomes 6.1 through 6.4 were assessed in the pilot semester, with most courses focused on outcome 6.1. Figure 4 shows which outcomes were most

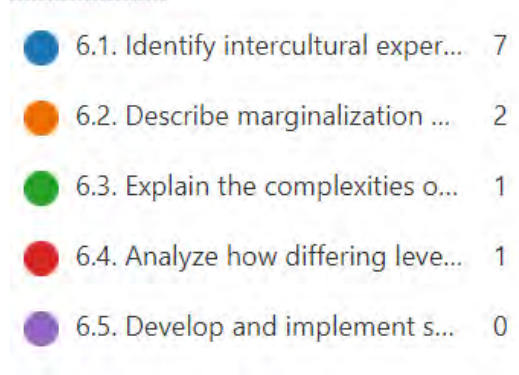
assessed across all designated courses and is an example of how the new assessment reporting procedure can provide institutional-level evidence collection information. ISLO 6.1 was included most often on the course inclusion application which is likely why it was the most reported subset of the ISLO. Allowing faculty to choose which ISLO they wanted to assess for this pilot was important to increase faculty ownership and agency in this process. It also provided information about where there was a need for growth in future assessments such as ISLO 6.5.

Figure 4

Cultural Competency Assessment Report Submissions by Learning Outcome

Institutional Student Learning Outcome assessed:

[More Details](#)



Reflection Question 2 - Discoveries and conclusions. Faculty discovered that benchmarks were met in most courses. The evidence collected in the LMS helped faculty determine the level of mastery of the outcomes in their course. They reported that most students met or exceeded expectations of learning. Several responses from reports indicated that the short form helped faculty have insights into their students' learning. For example, one faculty member wrote, "I was thrilled to see that the discussion mapped nicely to the ISLO and that it was a qualitative way to discover mastery." Another reported, "The typical struggle is to help students recognize the nuances of marginalization as a social process and be able to articulate how those processes work in a detailed and systematic way. All the students made significant progress in this regard." Finally, a third wrote, "I learned that the assignment itself needs adjustment... Students describe many arrays of ethnic and 'standard' foods in their lives, but they struggle to describe and/or identify ethnocentrism in food events."

Reflection Question 3 - Planned Improvement or Changes. Faculty used evidence to plan improvements where needed. For example, one faculty member plans to incorporate more assignments throughout the semester to increase student engagement and opportunities for learning. Another faculty member plans to adjust their use of participant observation to improve students' ability to describe and identify ethnocentrism through the assignment. A third faculty member will revise assignments to better incorporate the terminology within ISLOs 6.1 and 6.2. Finally, a fourth faculty member will refine the discussions to focus more directly on the ISLOs.

Reflection Question 4 - Requested Resources or Support. The majority of faculty reported they are receiving adequate support through the pilot program. One faculty member reported needing “Ideas for bringing a more interactive approach to the assignment that will not overly burden the students or me and will fit into the space of the class.” Another suggested “more college-wide training that requires a baseline understanding of how diversity relates to all disciplines at the college and that the history of marginalization and power is not an all-out attack on the current system, but an invitation to improve how we operate and communicate.”

Summary of Reflective Assessment Reports and Process

Discussing assessment findings and planned changes across the institution is a recommended practice in understanding evidence of learning (Suskie, 2018). The short form provided an integrated qualitative approach that led to interdisciplinary discussions of results and actions. For example, after using the new assessment procedures, faculty teaching Sustainability courses shared their assignments with new adjunct instructors and discussed their findings and pedagogical improvements. The Anthropology faculty began a department meeting with a sharing of best practices and brainstorming ideas around possible assignments and improvements in assessing ISLO 6.2. In Spring 2022 semester, an interdisciplinary conversation about student learning and competency in ISLO 6 was facilitated with faculty from Sustainability, Anthropology, Sociology, Psychology, Spanish, and History.

Ultimately the institution advanced student learning achievement with the Cultural Competency requirement in their curriculum, as evidenced by the assessment of student learning outcomes from the pilot semester of teaching. Sharing the results summary with all faculty in the pilot illuminated how assessment in individual courses was a crucial component in the institutional assessment for the Cultural Competency graduation requirement. Additionally, participating faculty demonstrated a shift in perception of assessment from meaningless and burdensome to valuable in their teaching and collaboration with colleagues. The shift in perspective was demonstrated through their positive feedback about the new reflective questions and willing use of the rubrics and assessment reports. Based on faculty comments in the reflective assessment reports, opportunities for further professional development include benchmark setting and faculty norming of rubric use.

Conclusion

In a single semester, through the cultural competency assessment process, participating faculty saw the larger institutional scaffolding of how students in their course had a learning trajectory bigger than their individual course. This pilot began with the goal of addressing the institution’s challenges in improving student learning by using improved assessment findings. As described in the Grand Challenges in Assessment Project, this required improved planning, measurement, and consideration of assessment data (Singer-Freeman & Robinson, 2020). Some faculty who were previously averse to institutional assessment practices embraced the new process when they saw its effectiveness in aligning student artifacts with course and institutional learning outcomes. Faculty examined not only student level comprehension, but also their own scaffolding and assignment prompts for the purposes of iterative improvements in pedagogy.

Assessment has been a crucial component of embedding cultural competency into this institution's curriculum. The results of this pilot revealed to faculty areas in which their students have gaps in mastery of learning outcomes. These discoveries resulted in improvements in scaffolded course design, clarity in alignment of assignments and outcomes, and pedagogical practices. An assessment process with reflective, narrative-style questions will increase sharing of best practices and improve integration of the cultural competency outcomes and sub-components now that it is institutionalized and ongoing. As continuation of the work is planned for future semesters, faculty participants are commended for their efforts and time. A norming and scoring of artifacts and a deeper discussion of benchmark scores are the next steps in ensuring the accuracy and consistency of this process.

The success of this pilot demonstrated that reflective questions are straightforward and simple to incorporate into online survey tools. Based on this evidence, we are able to implement the questions in additional assessment projects across the institution. This case study can be leveraged by other institutions to adopt similar assessment protocols. The authors congratulate those who participated in the initial implementation phase. Students will benefit greatly from this work as well as meet the outcome of recognizing and supporting diversity that will likely impact their lives beyond the classroom and well afterwards.

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Appendix A

Cultural Competency Course Application Rubric

Criteria: Course materials, CCNS description or syllabus outline maps to:	Score		Total Score
	0	1*	
ISLO #6 Global and Diversity Learning Outcomes:			
6.1 Identify marginalized viewpoints	Instructor does not have clearly defined materials, activities, assessments, and lectures that meet this objective.	Instructor has clearly defined materials, activities, assessments, and lectures that meet this objective with a majority of course materials integrating marginalized viewpoints.	
6.2. Recognize the complexities of multiple and competing theories of race, class, gender, ethnicity, disability, age, sexuality, nationality, and religion	Instructor does not have clearly defined materials, activities, assessments, and lectures that meet this objective.	Instructor has clearly defined materials, activities, assessments, and lectures that meet this objective.	
6.3. Discuss how differing levels of privilege shape life experiences	Instructor does not have clearly defined materials, activities, assessments, and lectures that meet this objective.	Instructor has clearly defined materials, activities, assessments, and lectures that meet this objective.	
6.4 Students will articulate how marginalized viewpoints shape and are shaped by social and cultural life.	Instructor does not have clearly defined materials, activities, assessments, and lectures that meet this objective.	Instructor has clearly defined materials, activities, assessments, and lectures that meet this objective.	
TOTAL SCORE:			