



Aligning Student Learning Outcomes and Employability

Today's universities measure student learning outcomes (SLOs) through in-class assessments targeting the micro and macro level of a learner's knowledge acquisition. At the micro level, these assessments take the form of quizzes, mid-term and final exams, and evaluations of assignments submitted by students.

At the macro level, SLOs feed into what administrators expect every student, regardless of specific curriculum, program, or major, to master in order to graduate. These are not skills-specific necessarily; they are ideals. These are the outcomes that students should be able "to know, think, or do across all courses" by the time they graduate.

A University's Macro-Level SLOs

The success or failure of a university's macro-level SLOs is later assessed (voluntarily) during the accreditation process via one of the nation's six regional accreditors. This assessment is something that the vast majority of the colleges and universities in the United States undertake currently to earn and maintain campus-wide accreditation.

What's the point of elaborating on how faculty measure learning as it pertains to the interests of students? Well, professors and—by extension universities—already assess students' attainment of micro and macro-level SLOs. They lead to what administrators believe is the end goal—graduation. But is graduation the end goal we should be focusing on? I would say no.

When student learning outcomes (SLOs) align with skills that employers seek from new hire candidates, recent graduates can achieve the ultimate outcome: employability.

Employability and the Awareness Gap

I've written before about the Awareness Gap, the inability for students and recent graduates to align the skills learned in the classroom with those that employers seek in job openings from entry-level employees. There is a broad range of skills and aptitudes students develop, learn, and acquire in the classroom and through their co-curricular activities, yet fail to recognize as such and how it connects to the workforce. Why? Students are extraordinarily busy



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attempting to achieve the SLOs of coursework, co-curricular activities and the broader objectives of the university in which they attend, while faculty closely measure the outcomes based on rubrics.

We must ask ourselves: why is there not a formal link between the attainment of SLOs at both the micro and macro-level over the course of a student's educational journey and the competencies that employers desire?

Recognizing a Broken Connection

To not foster this link formally represents a lost opportunity for universities and inhibits a student's successful transition into the workforce. Academic institutions that recognize this broken connection and then solve it successfully will unlock the intricate puzzle between addressing the needs and concerns of their students' and graduates' employability.

What are some of the skills learned in classrooms and co-curricular activities that far too frequently get snared by the Awareness Gap within the few precious moments between when educators provide these learning opportunities and when students acquire them? Critical thinking, leadership, communication, professionalism, teamwork, career management, digital technology, global fluency, just to name a few.

These skill outcomes—competencies if you will—are taught throughout students' entire educational journeys whether they know it, like it, or not. These hard-earned skill sets derived from their curriculum can help them become gainfully employed upon graduation. Colleges and universities rarely measure skills' outcomes adjacent to the coursework that produces them, but they should. Here's why.

The National Association of Colleges and Employers (NACE) collaborated extensively with employers and, through much



research, identified and defined the eight “competencies associated with career readiness.” The eight competencies that define a college graduate’s career readiness are the same eight skills I listed above.

Fusing the Connection Through Data

These are the skills that employers seek (in addition to the macro and micro-SLOs learned by students). They are skills already taught by educators in and out of the class. Fusing the connection through data between skills attained throughout a curriculum and the expertise today’s workforce requires will help students become career-ready and employable from day number one of graduation.

Ironically, such data exists now. It merely needs to be collected so that it can support and strengthen data sets already being tracked today by universities to help match the evolving requirements of the workforce more powerfully.

By embedding and tracking a learner’s career readiness into an existing curriculum, graduation will no longer be the finish line for either universities or students. It will have been replaced organically by the ultimate Student Learning Outcome for new graduates—employment—and the Awareness Gap will cease to exist. That is how the universities of tomorrow will hit a highly targeted bullseye in the eyes of both students and the employers who recruit from them.



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