

## Foreword

Student learning outcomes assessment (SLOA) presents college foreign language (FL) programs with both the opportunity and the challenge of not only stating and demonstrating their value, in terms of what and how well students learn, but also utilizing assessment information for illuminating and transforming their educational practices, effectiveness, and contributions to institutions and society. To date, common reactions by FL and other humanities educators to SLOA have ranged from perfunctory compliance, to ambivalence, to outright rejection, though there is also some evidence to suggest that in certain quarters, outcomes assessment has been embraced as a necessary and even welcome requirement for inspiring educational improvement. Indeed, at a point in time when rapid economic and socio-political changes may threaten the traditionally comfortable role for (and in some cases the very existence of) language and humanities programs in higher education, some have argued that it may be only through vigorous engagement with outcomes assessment and related processes that the contribution of FL education—language-proficiency-oriented and humanistic alike—will be perpetuated.

This edited collection explores something of the status quo of SLOA in FL higher education, with a particular focus on those actors and programs that have sought to take advantage of assessment as a medium for educational improvement. Couched under the broad cover term of “useful outcomes assessment,” the common thread connecting all of these contributions is the idea that assessment should be an intentional process of inquiring into the valued results of what we do in FL education *and* acting upon empirical evidence to ensure (or at least endeavor) that such values are realized. In other words, we do not just *do* assessment; rather we have to *use* assessment to bring about educational good.

The book features two sections, covering (a) policy, research, and leadership perspectives on useful outcomes assessment, and (b) examples of outcomes assessment in practice in diverse language programs. The first section includes three chapters that help to situate SLOA as it is being realized in FL higher education in the US. In chapter 1, Davis introduces the accreditation-based mandate, policy climate, and practical expectations for outcomes assessment, and he then reports in-depth findings from a nationwide survey of college FL programs regarding their SLOA practices. His chapter presents current best knowledge regarding factors within institutional and department cultures that either contribute to or hinder FL educators' capacity to engage with, act upon, and learn from outcomes assessment. In chapters 2 and 3, the contributors provide unique insights based on their observations over sustained periods of working on SLOA projects, from two distinct perspectives. Chapter 2, by Cachey and Pfeiffer, offers reflections by two foreign language department chairs whose leadership efforts spearheaded exemplary assessment work over a number of years; their ideas here offer not only practical guidance but also perhaps a degree of inspiration for other program leaders faced with the challenge of initiating and sustaining useful assessment processes. Chapter 3, by Askildson and Maxim, explores the potential role of university language centers in providing a locus, impetus, resources, and expertise that can prove facilitative of useful outcomes assessment endeavors; their experiences as directors of such centers may prove particularly instructive as another avenue towards jumpstarting assessment that will make a lasting contribution.

The contributions in the second section report on multi-year projects that have implemented a use-driven approach to outcomes assessment, thus providing a handful of new examples of FL educators proactively engaging in assessment of their own will. Each chapter reflects a distinct purpose for working on assessment at different points in the assessment cycle, from initial clarification of program goals and values for student learning, to the development of learning outcomes statements, to the assessment of specific learning outcomes at distinct points within a curricular trajectory, and ultimately to the use of outcomes assessment as a means for awareness-raising, improved communication, and instructional transformation.

Chapters 4 through 6 reflect early stages in the outcomes assessment process, as the nature of student learning and its relation to curriculum and instruction is clarified and expressed. Chapter 4, by Randall and Swaffar, reports on the use of assessment as a means for encouraging faculty engagement in curricular thinking by beginning with the bottom-up inspection of the qualities of student work produced in German courses. An interesting theme introduced here (and addressed in other chapters) is the rejection of institutionally-mandated and accountability-driven assessment practices in favor of internally-oriented processes that encourage broad participation and reflection. In chapter 5, Sasayama describes how the formative evaluation of a Japanese program, incorporating perspectives from program administrators, instructors, and students, led to the realization of a need for change in the instructional focus of certain courses and to the development of a variety of teacher resources. In this case, the creation of student learning outcomes was a natural result of the evaluation, in that they provided much-needed guidance to instructors on the learning expectations for their courses. Chapter 6, by Bualuan

and Martin, highlights the participatory process of generating consensus on student learning outcomes for first-year Arabic courses, followed by the initial collection of students' perspectives on their achievement of the newly stipulated outcomes. Of key interest here is the possibility of curricular improvement both on the basis of raising faculty awareness through the development of outcomes as well as through the initial collection of data focusing on perceived achievement.

Chapters 7 through 10 focus on the collection of various types of assessment data as the basis for on-going curricular monitoring and improvement. In chapter 7, Weber focuses on assessment of student learning outcomes in intermediate-level German courses, where critical development of student proficiency is expected as a gateway to more advanced learning. The use of multiple direct and indirect assessments in this case indicates how the complexities of student learning may call for a diversity of information to be adequately captured. Chapter 8, by Blad and Williams, describes how a program-wide assessment initiative was developed and sustained across a very large Romance Languages department, including the establishment of a committee, regularly scheduled meetings, and an annual focus on specific assessment targets (e.g., writing, speaking). Perhaps of most interest here is the extent to which communication and collaboration across distinct curricular levels, faculty groups, and languages were enabled through the on-going commitment to assessment. In chapter 9, De Fina and Melucci address the role of assessment in conjunction with a curricular innovation project in an Italian program, where a new emphasis on writing and culture was explored through student surveys. Key here are the insights into how the development of the assessment (a survey in this case) itself helped faculty come to a better understanding of the curriculum and learning outcomes, as well as the ways in which assessment findings pointed to both the positive impact of the curricular innovation and possible aspects of instruction in need of further adjustment. Finally, in chapter 10, Ryshina-Pankova reports on how a German program approached the challenge of assessing integrated humanities and language learning expectations as reflected in student writing at relatively advanced levels of instruction. Of critical interest here is how multiple factors (outcomes statements, pedagogic materials, instructional strategies) were evaluated simultaneously, by multiple instructors, as a basis for generating highly detailed expectations for exactly what writing should reveal about learners' development, and how those expectations were in turn assessed in collected student writing exemplars.

Much of the thought and work reported in this volume was supported by the U.S. Department of Education, in the form of an International Research and Studies grant ("Identifying and responding to program evaluation needs in college foreign language education," 2005–2008) as well as a Language Resource Centers grant at the National Foreign Language Resource Center at the University of Hawai'i at Mānoa (2006–2014). I am indebted in particular to the director of the NFLRC during much of that time, Professor Richard Schmidt, for his persistent belief in the value of this work and his intellectual, collegial, and financial support for the project. Many of the examples reported in this volume were also facilitated by Yukiko Watanabe, a PhD student at the University of Hawai'i at the time, and it is clear that the FL educators with whom she interacted benefited from her diligence, insights, and creativity in response to their diverse needs in pursuing useful outcomes assessment.

My co-editor on this volume, Dr. John McE. Davis, deserves substantial credit for his keen editorial eye, his efficiency, and his commitment to the core ideals reflected in this work. Indeed, it is primarily through discussions with John over a number of years now that my own thinking about the value of program evaluation and outcomes assessment has continued to develop. We have also embarked on a new, long-term project in this area with collaborators at the Center for Applied Linguistics, in the form of the Assessment and Evaluation Language Resource Center<sup>1</sup> (AELRC, also funded by the U.S. Department of Education). In the context of the AELRC, we will continue to research and disseminate ideas about useful student learning outcomes assessment and language program evaluation along the lines of the work reported here.

In the end, I believe that this collection—reflective as it is of distinct foreign languages in diverse program settings with unique assessment demands—suggests a positive iteration towards realizing the valuable contributions that outcomes assessment and program evaluation may make in FL education. Collectively, these FL educators have stepped away from the kind of thoughtless reactions and rejection that are typical of many others in the humanities, and they have also stepped away from mere compliance with external accountability demands and institutional mandates. Instead, they have moved proactively in the direction of deliberative, collaborative, empirical thought and action in support of educational effectiveness. By thinking about assessment in terms of how it might best be used in their own contexts and for their own purposes, they have demonstrated how we can harness powerful processes like assessment and evaluation in pursuit of the educational good that we all, I presume, hope to achieve. Ultimately, then, my hope is that this volume will serve as an impetus for foreign language programs and their related scholarly affiliates to rethink the potential of student learning outcomes assessment for playing an immediate, critical role in both supporting and, where needed, improving the value of what we do in FL education.

John M. Norris

*February 21, 2015, Arlington, VA*

---

<sup>1</sup> For more information, see <https://aelrc.georgetown.edu>.