We have made significant progress in our annual assessment. For the first time, we have 93 programs that submitted their annual assessment reports in the 2012-2013 academic year. Eighty-Three Percent (83%) have used direct measures to collect their data, and 71 percent have used the assessment results to make assessment and/or curriculum related changes.

However, the quality of these program assessment reports still varies a great deal. Many assessment reports were hard to understand. Moreover, many programs have not set standards of performance for their learning outcomes. Often times, we are not sure how the departments can have the same learning outcomes for different programs (e.g. graduate and undergraduate), how a learning outcome assessed in a particular year is related to the overall assessment plan for a department, or whether the programs have followed or updated their assessment plans as needed.

The quality of program assessment data, data analysis, and data presentation also differ significantly. A few reports did not provide any data, while other data in the reports were minimal, incomplete, or unclear. Therefore, a lot of relevant data were unreported, unreliable, invalid, or not actionable.

What happens to the annual assessment of student learning outcomes at Sacramento State is consistent with the survey results from almost 3,000 (n=2809) provosts or the chief academic officers in the U.S. (Kuh and Ikenberry 2009). After Provezis reviewed all the 7 regional accreditors in 2010, she found that “all regional accreditors expect learning outcomes to be defined, articulated, assessed, and used to guide institutional improvement”, and six urged faculty to be actively involved in creating learning outcomes and plans to link assessment to improvement. However, after so many years of assessing learning outcomes, the higher education institutions are still well-short of the goals of setting minimum standards of performance for student learning, collecting reliable and valid data to demonstrate that these outcomes have been achieved (Ewell, 2008; Provezis, 2010), or using the assessment data to close the assessment loop (Banta and Blaich, 2011).

We would like to change this situation. The four assessment consultants have met many times in the last two years to figure out how to effectively read these assessment reports, double check the reliability and validity of their feedbacks, and write feedback reports. It took a great deal of additional time for the four consultants to figure out how the assessment reports answered the questions in the template, what the consultants should include in these feedback reports, and how the reports and appendices in the feedbacks can be used by each program and our university to make our future annual assessment and program review better.

1. Problems/Opportunities:

Every June when academic units submit their annual assessment reports through the open-ended template, the university does not have an effective way to collect, analyze, and summarize the reports and evaluate their quality. Even though many academic units (departments/programs/colleges) have submitted the annual assessment reports every year for the past 10 years, it is not easy for the campus and the general public to obtain meaningful assessment data about this campus. For example, it is not easy to:

1. Identify how many program learning outcomes (PLOs, see Appendix 1: Glossary for more details) each academic unit has developed and how many program learning outcomes have been assessed each year in the last 10 years;

2. Clearly present the data, and explain the results and conclusions for EACH PLO (not for each course and/or for each assessment tool) so it is easy for the faculty and the general public to understand the conclusions for each program learning outcome;
Too often when WASC is mentioned, it is seen as the ever-present ‘stick,’ forcing us to do something about assessment. Then there are the pressures on us and other colleges and universities to measure up: meet the needs of more students, improve graduation rates and student success and close achievement gaps. One of the benefits of recently attending the WASC ARC (Academic Resource Conference) is that I could pick and choose from among a wide array of workshops and plenary sessions on both sides of the ‘fence’: student success and assessment.

I began with a pre-workshop titled “Student Success, First-year Initiatives and Assessment—Oh What a Tangled Web We Weave!” William Franklin, Associate VP for Student Success at CSU, Dominguez Hills provided persuasive data on a ‘Bridge’ program for first year students. A model program for bringing students to campus for remedial courses in the summer, block scheduling first year students in fall and spring and engaging students in high-impact practices shows great promise in improving retention and graduation rates and in closing the achievement gap for under-represented students. But, I left that session still wondering how such programs contributed to student learning and ultimately the quality of degrees earned.

One of the last sessions I attended, “Collaborating with the Community,” addressed ways in which partnering with P-12 can help improve alignment among educational sectors and, thereby, contribute to student success at the post-secondary level. Again, I walked away with some particular strategies pertinent to our Sacramento Pathways project (Sac City Unified School District, Sac City Community College, and us) but nothing that would necessarily improve teaching and learning. On the other hand, sessions I attended on building better assessment mechanisms such as “Rubric Assessment in General Education,” “The WSCUC Core Competencies,” and “General Education, Mission, and Values” came a little closer to addressing what is actually happening in the curriculum—at least as viewed through the lens of assessment—but often failed to illustrate the actual impact on student learning and curricular redesign (i.e. closing the loop) and completely ignored patterns of student success.

The session that interested me the most was “Meta-learning for Administrators: Improving Education Outcomes by Changing the Ways We Define Learning.” Here, at last, was a session that had implications for both student success initiatives and assessment of student learning. Based on advances in cognitive science, Stephen Carroll from Santa Clara University made a highly persuasive case for building content knowledge acquisition on a foundation of meta-cognitive skills. If our students are going to succeed as life-long learners and attain deep learning that will stay with them long after they have received their degrees, he argued, they need to develop “habits” of learning, and we need to teach and assess those skills.

This year I came away from the WASC ARC Conference with a number of strategies I hope to test out on our campus; perhaps even more crucial, I left with a keen sense that if we are to be effective in improving student success, we must also be effective in our assessment of student learning.
I have been struggling to articulate fully what I gleaned from the WASC 2014 conference. It is not that I failed to learn anything but rather that there were multiple specific lessons and ideas, but no explicit overarching ideology that would allow me to easily articulate in one short commentary. I have been trying to consider how do I put it all together, but each attempt ended in a spewing of remarks that resulted in a lecture that would neither be heard nor likely be useful (I could even acknowledge that, and I was writing it). So, instead, here is what I decided to share.

What I learned at WASC 2014, or how I spent my few days in Los Angeles:

- The inclusion of everyone is necessary to have any university program, policy or project be successful.
- All stakeholders have to be open to modifications in how they believe a program should be run and/or implemented in order for it to be successful.
- Develop buy-in by taking time to educate on the benefits and gains, which includes creating some through resource allocation.
- Centralize and thoroughly integrate master plans so that all programs relate back to it. This includes the graduation initiative.
- Assessment only matters when everything that came before it has been thoroughly and completely developed.
- In developing outcomes, consider, in part, what the students need, not just what we want to give them, i.e. the skills to be successful beyond college.
- Be aware of who our student population is and the importance of the education they are gaining.
- Be conscious that the knowledge in the major for undergraduates is not what will most often be used in their professional life. It is the skills and perspective they develop through the major that will aid them.
- Look to future employers of our students to help us understand what can be considered important.
- Be open to the idea that not all of the education gained by students will derive from in-class curriculum. For example, consider the culture and climate of the university.
- Consider the community as a place to educate students, both present and future students.
- Assessment should not drive the process, but instead, evaluate the outcome.
- Approach assessment plans from a formative view. The summative aspect is simply what informs you, which can be shared with others.
- Be open to changing anything and everything, but know why you are changing and for what larger goal. Always consider student learning as a central feature in the decision-making process.
- Think beyond antiquated ideas, but that does not mean we have to change everything. Just know why each component exists and how it contributes to the larger goals.

Now, elaboration on the ideas can always occur, or not, if so desired. I just tried to share those ideas that caused me to evaluate larger programmatic perspectives within the university. Hopefully, one point will do that for at least one or two of you. If not, well then, so be it.

“...It is not that I failed to learn anything but rather that there were multiple specific lessons and ideas, but no explicit overarching ideology that would allow me to easily articulate in one short commentary.”
One day, a student walked in to the Office of Academic Program Assessment (OAPA) and asked me, “What does this office actually do?” Not anticipating this inquiry from a student, I gave her a semi-formal answer that one could find on our website. That question later prompted one of my own: as an academic branch concerning quality of education and student success, how does the work at OAPA affect students like her and I?

Ten years ago, when I studied at one of the top universities in China, I was always complimented with statements like, “only very talented students can get into this school,” or “graduates from your school are outstanding.” They often assumed all students from the top universities were the best. As did I. However, I never understood what made a student successful. Without guidance, some of my college friends tapped all sorts of capitals to achieve whatever they believed as important. Others simply did nothing but complain about the quality of higher education as a whole. No one seemed to have a satisfactory answer.

If I had never traveled to the United States to study Sociology at California State University, Sacramento, or become a student assistant at OAPA, I wouldn’t have realized the question I should have been asking all along: what am I expected to know and be able to do with my college degree? During my first week at OAPA, Dr. Amy Liu introduced to me the Sacramento State Baccalaureate Learning Goals, AAC&U’s 16 VALUE Rubrics, and the Degree Qualification Profile. It was as if I was suddenly provided with a compass to guide me where to go. I became fascinated with academic assessment, and the work soon helped me find the answer to my question.

In-depth knowledge, develop a series of practical skills, as well as a sense of value, ethics and civic engagement. With this in mind, I quickly did a SWOT analysis (a method used to evaluate one’s strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats) to find out how to utilize available resources for my personal development.

When I assisted in giving feedback to the annual assessment reports, I discovered how my program, Sociology, incorporated Sac State’s goals into program learning outcomes, and how these outcomes were executed and evaluated by internal and external stakeholders. After we finished establishing the first institution-wide assessment database, I was able to compare the performance of my program to 91 other Sac State programs in terms of assessment status, achievements, areas to improve, and future plans. Moreover, participating in our assessment workshops, faculty learning communities and numerous one-on-one consulting meetings, I observed how dedicated faculty and staff were striving to address the issues they found through assessment, in order to continuously improve faculty teaching and student learning. All of these assessment efforts were made towards the same goal: to help students succeed.

After my experience at OAPA, I have a newfound appreciation for academic assessment, and am able to map my future in terms of academic achievement and career success. Though I can only speak for myself, students and faculty I met in China still have difficulty answering those fundamental questions. I imagine with my education and work at Sac State, I am more capable of making informed decisions now than I was ten years ago.

If I were to encounter the student again, I would answer, “through using assessment as a means, this office works hard to make sure students like you and me understand what we are expected to know and be able to do with our degree.” I also hope that sometime soon, she would be able to access various resources made available by the University assessment, and make plans for college and career accordingly, just like what I did at OAPA.
During the 2013-2014 academic school year, I’ve had the opportunity and privilege of working as a student office assistant for the Office of Academic Program Assessment (OAPA). This year I learned about the assessment process at Sacramento State University.

Assessment is a major component for measuring student learning outcomes and overall success. As someone who plans on getting into the field of education, I now have a greater appreciation for why assessment is fundamental and necessary. For instance, in order for educational institutions to better understand student learning outcomes, colleges and departments must have a clear idea for how to alter teaching methods and/or curriculum that are designed to meet the learning goals of the entire student body. Using the proper assessment tools and methods will help departments and colleges collect rich data. From the data collected, university officials, deans of colleges, chairs of departments, and faculty can better assess student learning outcomes and also make any modifications. OAPA has made tremendous efforts in creating an efficient assessment template for departments across the campus to use.

As a graduate student in Sociology, I have been inspired by Dr. Liu, Director of OAPA, to not only think critically about problems, but most importantly, to develop creative solutions in order to make positive changes within any social institution or organization. Before taking on the student office assistant position, Dr. Liu asked me if I felt comfortable working in an office environment. Previously, I did not have much experience; however, I gladly accepted the challenge. Over the course of the school year, I did the following: managed and designed OAPA’s website using a web content management system, edited numerous reports and documents, communicated with various resources across campus, entered data and constructed a data set, put together a newsletter, and further developed my professional skills.

On a daily basis, Dr. Liu challenged my critical thinking and problem solving skills. By doing so, I was able to push myself and accomplish many tasks and goals. Fortunately, I will be able to apply these skills and knowledge to my future career plans. As a student, it has been interesting to see what goes on “behind the scenes” at a major university. There are numerous challenges, efforts, and decisions constantly being made, for the sake of maintaining a smooth and quality education system. Even though I am only a student office assistant, I feel like I’m at least playing a minor role in improving an integral part of our university, that is, program assessment. It feels great knowing that there are people on campus who value assessing student learning outcomes, because I know that the overall goal is to improve all aspects of higher education.