

# Report on the Progress and Findings of the AY 2013 14 SJSU Graduate Program Learning Outcomes Initiative

*Submitted by Kathleen Roe and David Bruck*

*June 6, 2014 and August 5, 2014*

## I. Overview of the Initiative

This report summarizes the work to date on the AY 2013 14 Graduate Program Learning Outcomes Initiative. Under the leadership of AVP Pam Stacks and Associate Dean David Bruck, the project was designed to address four primary questions:

- 1. Do all SJSU graduate degree programs have program learning outcomes, are they being used in program planning and assessment, and are they publicly available?*
- 2. To what degree do the graduate program learning outcomes correspond to the newly adopted university learning goals for all students?*

## II. Summary of the Methods of the Graduate PLO Initiative

### A. Selected Graduate Programs. Seventy distinct

temporarily being taken “off the books” during redesign, and (4) the planned opening of admissions for new or reconfigured programs.

2. **It can be difficult to identify the exact number of SJSU graduate programs** at any point due to the changes above that occur throughout the academic year. A list of graduate programs, current in the fall, may already be outdated by spring. Because GS&R must be informed of all new and all terminating programs, it would follow that it would be easy to keep track of the number and identity of graduate programs on campus. However, several factors complicate this determination. Programs with limited faculty and low enrollments may suspend a master’s degree major without terminating it, as mentioned in the previous paragraph. In this way, it can be revived at a later time without a new program proposal and without the need for the array of university approvals and Chancellor’s Office approval. Theater Arts, Recreation, and Technology and Aviation are in this state.
3. **Graduate advisor appointments are fluid, even within an academic year.** The person serving as graduate advisor may change during the semester or over the summer, as departmental roles change, faculty go on sabbatical, etc. This leaves a fair number of graduate advisors who may not be fully “in the loop,” especially if they are fulfilling only a single semester obligation or are simply new to the position. This can also lead to key information slipping through the cracks as coordinators transition. Summer is a particularly fluid period, with several department chairs serving as graduate coordinators until faculty return in the fall.
4. **The three “official” program lists – CSU Mentor, GS&R, and GAPE – have slight but sometimes important inconsistencies** based on their different concerns and data points (*i.e.*, applications for admission, program oversight, and admissions and fulfillment of candidacy and

8. **The graduate advisors are responsive, committed, and engaging.** Our contact with all of them, including the doctoral program directors, always resulted in fast response, positive action, and frequent expressions of gratitude for our interest and support of their programs, their workload, and their intentions.

best practices, innovative program ideas, highlights of the Graduate Advisors Meetings, program and advisors snapshots and the PLO initiative.

9. Use the GS&R website as a resource for the PLO initiative. Regular updates, examples, resources and FAQs could all help graduate advisors understand and engage with the Initiative and their peers, not only on the specific PLO activities of the moment but also on the broader issues of the meaning, quality, and integrity of our degrees. The College of Business accreditation website (<http://www.sjsu.edu/cobaccreditation/>) and electronic newsletters (<http://www.sjsu.edu/cobaccreditation/docs/AccreditationBulletinIssue1.pdf> <http://www.sjsu.edu/cobaccreditation/docs/Accreditation%20Bulletin%20Issue%204.pdf>) are excellent examples of this

or key curricular milestones (*e.g.*, Archives & Records Administration) are variations among the SJSU graduate programs.

2. **The link label should be the same – “Graduate Program Outcomes”** across all programs. This is the most common link label and

terms substitutes for “program learning outcomes” in more than just the programs listed above. A range of terms is to be expected among programs as diverse as ours; however, the

11. Few of our PLOs are expressed at a level high enough to qualify as “developed” or “highly developed” on the “assessable” domain of the WASC Program Learning Outcomes Rubric. According to the WASC rubric, “developed” PLOs describe how students can demonstrate that which has been learned (*e.g., Graduates can write reports in APA style*). While this phrasing has not been a focus of SJSU’s program outcome guidance to date, it is useful to know that this is the way of the future and to see how close – or far – we are from an emerging set of criteria. We point out that other than the Assessment and Evaluation Committee, *Graduates can know and*



would be the ultimate, albeit challenging, standard

about who is responsible for what, including developing, vetting, and posting the graduate PLOs.

D. Recommendations

1. **GS&R can proactively explore key themes and priorities resulting from the AY 2013 14 program planning decisions and then use those themes as content for AY 2014 15 Graduate Advisors Meetings.** Program planning is a very inwardly focused experience (albeit requiring considerable attention to context and input from external stakeholders). Committing to a course of action when the faculty is exhausted from the self study experience is necessary but often challenging. but

Similarly, several graduate advisors have requested our maps to include in their annual assessment reports. It appears that program leaders are realizing the value added of alignment with the University Learning Goals!

## B. Alignment Issues

1. ***ULG #1: Specialized Knowledge*** is often implied as prerequisite for admission to a graduate program and not necessarily specified in a graduate PLO. When that is assumed, all graduate programs meet this goal for all students. However, if the goal must be specifically stated as a program learning outcome, the percentage addressing this goal that way drops significantly. The clarifying language after the goal ("*depth of knowledge required for a degree, as identified*")

6. *ULG 5b: Diverse and global perspectives through engagement with the multidimensional SJSU community* was the most problematic University Learning Goal for the graduate programs. Several practical challenges are immediately evident: (1) many graduate programs are technical and highly specialized, and they do not wish to devote precious time and do not recognize the breadth gained or urgency to address global or diverse perspectives; (2) graduate programs are far shorter than undergraduate programs (usually 30 units compared to 120), limiting the time available for university community engagement; (3) graduate programs are often completely contained within a single academic unit, thus barricading them from exposure to other dimensions of the university community; (4) graduate students are usually older than undergraduates, with professional commitments and responsibilities that limit the time available for engagement with much more than their program and its requirements; and (5) many graduate programs are built on evening class schedules to accommodate working professionals, which limits student engagement with the broader campus community. The latter point is even more pronounced for off campus, special session graduate programs. And yet, most program leaders would say that a graduate degree in their field from San José State University is different on some important level from the same degree offered by another institution. Some of that difference is embedded in SJSU's unique demographic, historic, and community based character and composition. Further exploration of this discordant alignment will tease out if this "SJSU difference" should be historic, practical, or both.

programs to incorporate (artificially) such a San Jose/Silicon Valle/Bay Area flavor simply for the sake of complying with university learning goals. There is a gradation in uniqueness and in local integration across the diverse SJSU offerings. It would be useful to categorize

*programs to demonstrate and proudly assert student capabilities upon graduation, thus demonstrating, with evidence, the meaning, quality, and integrity of their degrees.*

7. **Continue to make the case that attention to program outcomes is important far beyond the parameters of the WASC institutional review.** Program leadership on this issue is key to continuous program improvement. It also helps a program to center itself in the mix of SJSU degrees, demonstrate its value added, and advocate for resources. There is hope that this process will lead to self evaluation of the set of PLOs devised by the program. Clearly, there are useful PLOs and assessment strategies and procedures, and there are cynical ones that offer ease of completion but produce little information that could prompt meaningful revision and improvement and thus be of any real value. Between monitoring, peer pressure, and self reflection, we foresee modification in the choice of learning outcomes. However, a change in learning outcomes must be accompanied by addition to assessment plans. One must

programs. Undoubtedly, however, we will not find 100% correspondence between the ULGs and program curricula.

4. *Do graduate programs make unique contributions to student learning that are not yet reflected in the university goals?*

**It is also too soon to answer this question**, since the program outcomes may not yet fully reflect what students are able to do as a result of their course of study. Continued refinement of the PLOs and exploration of the processes and results of the culminating experiences should provide the evidence needed to address this question. Particularly promising are the outcomes related to higher levels of learning and higher order thinking, leadership, and professional development.

## **B. Recommended Next Steps**

Based on the evidence presented in this report and the experience of working on the Graduate PLO Initiative for AY 2013 14, the following seven actions are recommended as next steps. Following each action item is the time frame and suggested responsible lead.

1. **Review and prioritize the 26 recommendations included in this report** (Summer 2014: GS&R leadership, PLO Initiative principals)
2. **Continue to work with the graduate advisors as a group and with individual program leaders as needed to refine the PLOs until everyone is certain that they accurately reflect program intentions and processes** (AY 2014 15: GS&R leadership, PLO Initiative principals)
3. **Bring in WASC resource people to help**

## Principles of the Graduate PLO Initiative

### WASC Accreditation and Graduate Programs – Statement of Principles

1. GS&R is proud of our graduate programs and committed to their success.
2. Any threat to the accreditation of SJSU overall is a threat to our graduate programs. Similarly, deficiencies in our graduate programs pose a serious threat to the university's successful WASC accreditation affirmation.
3. The SJSU WASC Institutional Review leadership, GS&R leadership, and graduate program leaders share responsibility for the processes, assessment, and