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Defining co-curricular assessment and charting a path forward

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Abstract: Co-curricular and extra-curricular activities have traditionally been part of the student’s application of knowledge and skills outside the structured curriculum. Co-curricular learning, in particular, is viewed as part of the student’s authentic and real-life engagement with content often directed and administered by the program of study. Frequently, co-curricular learning occurring outside the programmatic structure, such as student affairs, has often been overlooked as a meaningful area to assess learning. In this article, we aim to define co-curricular learning and the assessment of these activities. We also highlight the importance of co-curricular learning spaces as a part of the student learning portfolio and the assessment data as an important contributor to program and institutional improvements. To review the current state of co-curricular learning, we examine the topic from multiple perspectives, including higher education institutions and accrediting bodies.

Keywords: *Co-curriculum, co-curricular assessment, extra-curricular*

Where we are going on this journey

The roles, responsibilities, and services colleges and universities offer their students have expanded in the 20th and early 21st centuries (Thelin, 2004). Academic support units, experiential learning opportunities, research programs, and leadership training have expanded beyond the general curriculum (Thelin, 2004). As a result, colleges and universities are also assessing the outcomes¹ of these activities. However, these activities did not develop uniformly across the higher education landscape. As such, we first turn to bodies that guide regional and national standards to gain an understanding of whether, and to what extent, normalization across institutions is occurring for assessment of co-curricular activities.

As part of the Grand Challenges in Assessment project, the implementation team focused on improving the measurement of student learning over time. This paper on co-curricular learning contributes to the discussion on using assessment to affect pedagogical changes, specifically, it focuses on defining co-curricular learning for the purpose of advancing assessment practices.

¹ In this paper we use the term “outcomes” throughout for consistency. We acknowledge that learning “objectives” are also measurable effects of student learning, and these terms represent distinct concepts for the assessment community.

First, we present a definition of co-curricular learning informed by a review of the literature. Next, we establish the context of co-curricular learning and its assessment within the higher education landscape, particularly its connection to accreditation and standards. Finally, we outline five challenges for the higher education assessment field to take on to further the field's collective understanding and practice of co-curricular assessment.

Defining Co-Curricular Learning

Understanding the effects of co-curricular learning and assessment on student engagement, achievement, and success warrants a review of the literature to establish a well-articulated definition and tenets of the term. The concept of the extra-curricular experience preceded use of the term "co-curricular" to describe activities that describe student learning outside the classroom. In many instances, both terms have been used interchangeably even though they define and describe different experiences. In the following sections, we present our review of the literature for definitions and application of both terms, and we propose a working definition for co-curricular learning to guide the work moving forward.

According to Suskie (2015), earlier mention of extra-curricular activities referred to experiences outside the curriculum. Divisions such as student services and athletics conducted such activities often without consultation with faculty or academic divisions. Suskie (2015) adds that out-of-classroom experiences are more effective when integrated in academic experiences. It is well documented that the types of experiences that connect to and derive from academic studies help students achieve meaningful outcomes (Kolb, 1984; Kuh, 2008; Stirling & Kerr, 2015; Suskie, 2015, 2018). Co-curricular learning and engagement are rooted in a well-established theoretical framework drawing on the works of Kolb's (1984) experiential learning theory and Kuh's (2008) high impact practices which applies Kolb's theory (Stirling & Kerr, 2015).

To clarify the meaning of co-curricular activities and to differentiate it from extra-curricular, Bartkus et. al. (2012) conducted a review of the literature to better understand and articulate the definitions. Most often, reference to either term was more a description of the activity rather than a definition of the term. They argue that the lack of a formal definition for either term, extra-curricular and co-curricular limits researchers' ability to conduct meaningful studies to understand impact of these types of activities on student engagement and learning. To better classify the terms, they analyzed the meanings of "extra" compared to "co." "Extra" in extra-curricular means it is in addition to or outside the curriculum, while "co" in co-curricular means it is in conjunction with and aligned with the curriculum. Therefore, extra-curricular activities can be either academic or non-academic, are outside the normal classroom, and are not part of the curriculum, may or may not be assessed, and are optional (Bartkus, et. al., 2012). Consequently, co-curricular activities are aligned with the student's major or divisional goals and objectives, are outside of the classroom, enhance the curriculum, are evaluated and/or assessed, and are often required by programs of study (Bartkus, et. al., 2012).

Subsequently, an activity can be extra-curricular or co-curricular depending on the student's area of study and interests. For example, if a business major enrolls in an activity to learn how to play the guitar as a hobby, then the activity is extra-curricular, since it is not related to the student's studies and

it is not linked to any learning outcomes within the program. However, the same activity can be co-curricular if a student is majoring in music and playing the guitar can be linked to learning outcomes as defined by the student's major. Nonetheless, the proposed explanation of extra- and co-curricular in the example given poses a problem when the activity is administered by an unidentified instructor and is not assessed. Therefore, it is important that co-curricular learning is monitored and is under the purview of an academic program or a division at the institution that closely collaborates with faculty and programs.

Sources differ in their agreement on whether co-curricular activities are required or voluntary. Stirling and Kerr (2015) cite sources that define co-curricular learning as voluntary and not required (Great School Partnership, 2013), while others refer to these activities as required (Bartkus, et. al., 2012). Neither of these examples clarified the nature of the activity and whether this played a role in its classification as required or voluntary. Nonetheless, all cited sources agree that co-curricular activities are aligned with the curriculum and learning outcomes and are designed to enhance the student experience (Kuh, 2001; Beltman & Schaeben, 2012; Elias & Drea, 2013; Foubert & Grainger, 2006). Kuh (2013) asserts the interrelations between curricular and co-curricular experiences and how important they are to enhance the student experience and development. To make the activities and experiences meaningful, one must align them to clear learning outcomes and shift the emphasis to learning and not overemphasize the activity.

To make the connection between theory and practice and apply Kolb's (1984) experiential learning theory, one must be purposeful in connecting the experiential activity to curricular learning and linking the experiences to authentic real-world applications (Moore, 2010; Stirling & Kerr, 2015). Additionally, the theoretical framework highlights the importance of Kuh's (2008) application of Kolb's Experiential Learning Cycle in creating high-impact experiences that are designed to teach students to **Reflect** on concrete experiences, **Integrate** all curricular and co-curricular experiences, and **Apply** learned experiences in a variety of settings (Kuh, 2001, 2003, 2008; Stirling & Kerr, 2015). Kuh (2013) further accentuates the interdependence of curricular and co-curricular learning as a crucial part of students' holistic development and well-being. Kolb's theory and its application through Kuh's *High Impact Practices* model supports the symbiosis between curricular and co-curricular offerings as part of a learning process where additional experiences could be transformative (Evans, et. al, 2010; Kolb, et. al, 2001). However, these co-curricular experiences need to be excellent and tailored to the student's needs. To achieve this goal these experiences should be well-focused and have clear and measurable learning outcomes (Suskie, 2015).

Given the variability in expectations of what constitutes a co-curricular learning experience, it is judicious to identify the common elements across definitions of co-curricular learning. Most definitions examined had the following in common: Co-curricular learning, 1) is tied to the curriculum, 2) aligns with learning outcomes connected to a program or to a division, 3) is an experience outside of but complements the curricular instruction, 4) designed to enhance and support learning and engagement, 5) supplements the students' curricular experience, 6) may reside within a program or outside the departmental and programmatic structure, and 7) is always assessed. In addition, several of the definitions differ on whether co-curricular learning activities are required and whether academic credit is awarded either in accordance with degree requirements or as general academic credit.

Given all the variations stated in the literature, the authors of this paper propose the following working definition for co-curricular learning: Co-curricular learning experiences should align with learning outcomes connected to students' curricular and career goals, comprise experiences outside of curricular instruction, are designed to enhance and support learning and engagement, supplement the student's curricular experience, are assessed, and data collected from the assessment of co-curricular activities should be part of data analysis and application for overall programs and institutional improvements.

As such, institutions need to ensure that collaboration between departments, divisions, programs, and student services is occurring and faculty who teach the curriculum are aware of co-curricular learning and assessment data from these spaces are shared with them.

Guidance from Accreditors

The purpose of assessment is to identify opportunities for improvement and to inform practice whether in curricular or co-curricular spaces. However, to ensure participation, the often-cited reason for conducting assessments in higher education institutions is for compliance purposes to fulfill state, federal, or accreditation requirements (Archer, 2017; Cumming & Zhao, 2015; Garofalo & L'Huillier, 2015; Miller & Cumming, 2020). Acknowledging the impact of accreditors on institutions' behaviors and framing of concepts or policies, we reviewed the standards and other supporting documents for co-curricular learning from the seven regional accrediting commissions (Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities [NWCCU], Higher Learning Commission [HLC], WASC Senior College and University Commission [WSCUC], Accrediting Commission for Community and Junior Colleges, Western Association of Schools and Colleges [ACCJC], Southern Association of Colleges and School Commission on Colleges [SACSCOC], Middle States Commission on Higher Education [MSCHE], and New England Commission on Higher Education [NECHE]). In our review of the accreditation standards and supplemental materials provided to institutions, we found a range from no mention of "co-curricular assessment" or "co-curriculum" in the accreditation standards (NWCCU)², to standards specifying a definition, expectations for assessment, and supporting documents or materials (Higher Learning Commission, 2020a, 2020b; WASC Senior College and University Commission, 2021).

HLC and WSCUC included several references to co-curricular in the accreditation standards and supporting materials. HLC (2020a) defines co-curricular as "learning activities, programs and experiences that reinforce the institution's mission and values and complement the formal curriculum. Examples: Study abroad, student-faculty research experiences, service learning, professional clubs or organization, athletics, honor societies, career services, etc." (para. 2). WSCUC (2021) describes co-curricular programs as those "that are aligned with [the institutions'] academic goals, integrated with academic programs, and designed to support all students' personal and professional development" (p.18). WSCUC (2021) also states that institutions are expected to assess the effectiveness of co-curricular programs. HLC's (2020b) standards include the encouragement of student participation in

² The NWCCU did have a reference to co-curricular programs in the 2010 Standards. These were primarily student activities or non-academic related aspects of the collegiate experience. The 2020 Standards do not reference co-curricular programs.

co-curricular activities (Criterion 1.C.1.), as well as the implementation “effective processes for assessment of student learning and for achievement of learning goals in academic and cocurricular offerings” (Criterion 4.B.1.). Recognizing that “stakeholders have been inconsistent in their interpretation of [co-curricular] assessment” the HLC (2020a) published clarifying documents and provided workshops and other tools to institutions (para. 3).

In addition to the variation of whether an accreditor identifies co-curricular activities within their standards, there are variations in the definitions or examples themselves. HLC (2020a) distinguishes “co-curricular” from “extra-” curricular by asserting that the former is “an essential part of, or partner to, [an institution’s] curricular activities” (para. 5). MSCHE’s (2015) *Standards IV: Support of Student Experience* includes “extracurricular activities that are regulated by the same academic, fiscal, and administrative principles and procedures that govern all other programs” (p. 8) and AACJC (2014) places co-curricular programs within student support services. In the *2020 Resource Manual for The Principles of Accreditation*, SACSCOC provides examples of co-curricular activities that include public safety and financial aid. These examples rest in the administrative or operational capacity of the institution, where a student might interact but not necessarily have specific learning outcomes.

What does this mean? There are several practical implications due to the variety within the regional accreditors for inclusion and definitions of co-curricular learning and assessment. First, the different definitions lead to varied understanding of what these activities entail, how they relate to the general academic curriculum, and the outcomes assessed. Whereas one region views co-curricular as extra- or in addition to the general academic experience, their approaches to assessment will differ from a region that places a more direct relationship between these activities and the curricular activities of the institution. Professional and disciplinary accreditors may include reference to regional accreditor definitions and provide their own definitions of co-curricular activities, as well as their own expectations for assessment of these activities - adding further variety to the field. Second, seeing the evolution of inclusion in the accreditation standards as well as the developing definitions illustrate that our understanding of co-curricular learning will continue to evolve. Third, this means institutions have space for their own perspectives on the elements that make up an educational experience and the relationships between these elements. Institutions may have the ability to continue shaping the perspective on what co-curricular activities are, what their outcomes may be, and what co-curricular assessment entails.

Guidance from the CAS Standards

The mission of the Council for the Advancement of Standards in Higher Education (CAS, 2022b) is to advance “student learning and success through uniting higher education associations in the use of professional standards for the development, assessment, and improvement of quality programs, and services” (para. 2). The organization is comprised of representatives from 40 professional associations across the field of higher education. These representatives form a council, which has established guidelines for 48 identified functional areas that support student learning and success in higher education, including academic advising, dining services, collegiate recreation programs, and undergraduate research programs (CAS, 2022b). In addition, 12 general standards serve to guide

program development and assessment across all functional areas. Use of the *CAS Standards* is optional, differing from an accrediting body; however, the functional area standards and general standards provided by CAS help to guide assessment of co-curricular programs, making them relevant to this review.

CAS clearly defines curricular and co-curricular in its glossary of terms, but offers no definition for or reference to extra-curricular:

curricular. Relating to the subjects comprising a course of study in a school or college that leads to certification, licensure, or a college degree.

co-curricular. Activities that take place outside the classroom but reinforce or complement classroom curriculum in some way. Activities are typically ungraded and may not offer any form of academic credit, but they serve to support student learning, development, and success. (CAS, 2022a, para. 23-24)

The term co-curricular rarely appears in publicly available CAS documents. Yet, as the existence of CAS seeks to promote quality of learning outside the curriculum, it is implied that the programs, services, and activities described in the standards include, by nature, co-curricular; cross-functional programs and activities may also include curricular activities and programs.

The CAS authors often use several broad terms to describe the target activities and programs for CAS standards and guidelines, such as “programs” (CAS, 2022). CAS provides a glossary definition of the singular term “program” that identifies two possible uses:

Within the *CAS Standards* the term refers to either: (a) institutional structure such as a department, unit, or sub-unit (e.g., the orientation program) or (b) institutional activities or events, such as an invited lecture, a workshop, a social event, or a series of organized presentations over time (e.g., a “lunch and learn” program). (CAS, 2022a, para. 45)

However, many documents use the plural form of programs with adjectives (e.g., “institutional programs and services,” “higher education programs and services,” or “support programs and associated activities”) that imply the application of “programs” in reference to co-curricular activities and services provided within a specific functional area. Based on the CAS glossary definition of co-curricular, these terms seem to be used somewhat interchangeably throughout general standards, functional area guidelines, and other resources.

Using the *CAS Standards* as a common framework for co-curricular assessment can provide structure and clear expectations for all institutions regardless of expectations from accreditors. However, application of general and functional area standards is not mandatory. In addition, institutions may have varying capacities and divisions to design and execute assessment of co-curricular programs. CAS partnerships help promote the use of its standards; however, it is unclear how many institutions of higher education apply the *CAS Standards* to co-curricular assessment and programs. To better understand the current state of co-curricular assessment across higher education in the US, we recommend a review that surveys current practices across institutions and co-curricular activities. The results of the survey will inform the authors on what institutions are doing in this space, affording us the opportunity to create a common definition and common best practices for assessing co-curricular learning.

Current State of Co-Curricular Assessment

Assessment in the co-curricular space could vary from non-existent, self-reporting by students, or peer evaluation of performance without the guidance of learning outcomes. At our institutions, faculty, staff, and student services have started incorporating learning outcomes in these activities, and tangentially started aligning these outcomes with the students' career or program goals. One example of a successful co-curricular implementation of best practices in assessment are co-curricular activities where Ph.D. students are offered the opportunity to participate in courses and professional development opportunities that guide them into enhancing their teaching skills and defining their career goals and objectives. In this program, the students enroll in a co-curricular course delivered by a center that coordinates its curriculum with faculty and directors of Ph.D. programs. The course stated learning outcomes are well defined and align with the students' programs of study and career goals. The course is divided by topics and delivered online. After the completion of each topic, the students are guided to create a lesson plan based on best practices in teaching and learning. The assessments of these activities are two-fold: 1) peer evaluations of student presentations using an established rubric, then 2) instructor evaluation of self-reflections about the implementation of these practices in authentic settings.

Another example in undergraduate studies is application of knowledge in real life settings. Students in mechanical engineering are encouraged to participate in a co-curricular activity, where they are guided to build cars, rockets, or other devices using the knowledge they acquired in their courses. The activity is directly aligned with program objectives, facilitated by program faculty, and evaluated using a rubric to determine fitness of the designs and acquisition of knowledge. These activities allow students to apply their knowledge in authentic and innovative settings. Students can formulate abstract principles and apply them to different settings and are evaluated using formative assessments where feedback guides their learning improvement.

A third example is a first-year student program that incorporates holistic learning outcomes during a student's first semester. The program includes sessions guided by faculty, staff, and peer mentors where students grouped by academic discipline or interest areas develop academic and social skills and build their knowledge of resources and services to support their general health and well-being as they transition to college life. The activities are aligned with the institution's objectives for students to explore topics and develop skills that will prepare them for future academic and personal success. Awareness of resources, academic and social self-confidence, general health and well-being, and sense of belonging are assessed at multiple points during the semester to identify the impact of the program on students.

The above examples describe a variety of ways to successfully collaborate across divisions and effectively assess learning in co-curricular activities. However, we could just as easily identify and describe innumerable activities that lack clearly articulated learning outcomes, are not meaningfully assessed, and are not linked to curricular programs or outcomes; yet these activities contribute significantly to student learning and advance the curriculum. We hope that our proposed future

directions will guide institutions and practitioners in more comprehensively assessing learning that occurs outside the classroom in alignment with academic programs, divisional and institutional goals, and student career objectives.

Future Directions for Co-Curricular Assessment

Our definition of co-curricular learning is purposefully broad to account for the nuances that exist across American higher education institutions. As a result, what institutions include in their definition of co-curricular learning will vary. While some may include experiential and applied learning in authentic settings, others may focus on giving the student an opportunity to add additional skills that may enhance their leadership and critical thinking skills. These opportunities, regardless of context, need to connect with clear learning outcomes that align with the student's stated goals whether programmatic or career oriented. This is crucial for student learning, especially learning that occurs in many different spaces and can take many different forms. It is important to capture a holistic view of student learning and allow them the opportunity to build on a portfolio that can be improved and expanded throughout their lifelong learning journey. Considering that learning outcomes associated with co-curricular learning need to be assessed and results are important for program, course, and institutional improvements, we anticipate five challenges for higher education to take on to further our collective understanding and practice of co-curricular learning and assessment:

1. **Conduct a review of current practices.** To better understand the current state of co-curricular assessment across higher education in the US, the authors recommend a review that surveys current practices across institutions and co-curricular activities.
2. **Adopt a shared definition.** Identify and agree upon a shared definition of co-curricular activities. Acknowledge how the definition has evolved over time and across contexts. Incorporate perspectives from multiple stakeholders to form a holistic view of what constitutes co-curricular activities, learning, and assessment on individual campuses as well as across institutions.
3. **Articulate the responsibility for co-curricular assessment.** Determine what the responsibilities for co-curricular assessment are for colleges and universities, and within their respective organizational structures. This will require engagement of internal and external stakeholders. External stakeholders may include potential employers and community leaders who can determine the experiences the candidates require in the field and assessment of skills needed for potential employment.
4. **Identify best practices in co-curricular assessment.** Building the knowledge base for the field is critically important. Implications for practice include identifying areas of growth, enhancing the collective knowledge of the relationship between co-curricular activities and student learning outcomes, coordination and collaboration of assessment practices, and adoption of new or adaptation of current policies, norms, and behaviors related to co-curricular assessment.
5. **Create collaboration spaces between curricular and co-curricular groups.** Most important of all, for assessment of co-curricular learning to succeed, there should be intentional collaborations across campus that include all learning spaces. These initiatives should be supported and guided by leadership.

Conclusion

Through our review of the literature, it became apparent that more often, the terms co-curricular and extra-curricular learning are used interchangeably. To differentiate between the two learning spaces, we proposed a working definition for co-curricular learning, in particular a definition that asserts the importance of linking co-curricular activities to well-defined learning outcomes and linked to the student's programmatic and career goals as defined by the institution. The definition stresses the importance of assessing these activities and applying data points from learning assessments in co-curricular activities to affect programmatic and institutional improvements and allocation of resources.

The findings from the literature and the authors' experiences in higher education led to the identification of challenges that need to be surmounted. To overcome these challenges, we advocate for a survey of practices in higher education institutions and how they currently implement and assess co-curricular learning. It was also evident that co-curricular learning means different things in different spaces, and therefore agreeing on a shared definition is paramount, especially if research is to be meaningful and impactful. It is important to identify best practices in and applications of co-curricular learning assessment.

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