

Back to the Basics: Student Learning Outcomes

Writing Program Student Learning Outcomes

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Program Student Learning Outcomes

Program Student Learning Outcomes (PSLOs) describe knowledge, skills, abilities and attitudes that a student can demonstrate upon the completion of a particular degree or certificate.

Program Student Learning Outcomes address the following questions:

- What knowledge, skills, abilities, and attitudes should the ideal student graduating from our program demonstrate?
- How will they be able to demonstrate these capabilities?
- How well does our program prepare students for careers, graduate, professional study, and/or lifelong learning?
- What assessments can we use to demonstrate growth in students' knowledge, skills, abilities, and attitudes as they progress through our program?

Tips on Writing Program SLOs

1. Learning outcomes should itemize the most important goals that the program has defined for its students. Programs often have a large number of goals; learning outcomes reflect the most important of these goals.
2. A well-written outcome relates specifically to a program and to how the program's faculty envisions student learning.

For example: "Students will write effectively" could apply to almost any academic program. In contrast, an English department's goals that students should be able to "research and write focused, convincing analytical essays in clear, grammatical prose" and "tailor writing for various audiences and purposes" indicates what that department sees as essential writing skills. Other programs, even other English departments, may focus on different aspects of writing. The point is to articulate your department's goals.

3. Frame all PLOs around the desired outcome or end result of the learning, not around the process or means.
4. Describe observable student behaviors; avoid fuzzy terms when possible. Many will find Bloom's Taxonomy useful for choosing specific verbs.

For example, it is difficult to observe whether a student "understands" or "appreciates" a concept but easy to judge whether he or she can "articulate" or "explain" one. Concrete verbs such as define, argue, and create are more helpful than vague verbs such as know or understand or passive verb phrases such as "is exposed to." Learning outcomes phrased with concrete verbs will help guide the choice of assessment methods. It is much easier to envision assessing whether a student can "define" something than whether he or she "appreciates" something.

5. Be specific about what students who complete the program should be able to do.

For example, “understand” is not only vague but may not appropriately represent what is expected of students. Understanding is a low-level cognitive outcome, and a program may want its students to be able to do more than “understand” a concept, such as “critique” it or “apply” it.

6. Find a balance between specific and broad outcomes.

Too vague: “Students will demonstrate information literacy skills.”

Too specific: “Students will be able to use the college’s online services to retrieve information.”

Better: “Students will be able to locate information and evaluate it critically for its validity and appropriateness.”*

*Example from Linda Suskie, *Assessing Student Learning: A Common Sense Guide*, Second Edition, San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2009.

7. Outcomes should be challenging, yet attainable.

Examples of Effectively Expressed Program Learning Outcomes

Linda Suskie, a vice president of the Middle States Commission of Higher Education, provides examples of effectively expressed program learning goals.

In her examples, the outcomes are broad enough to capture significant, higher-order learning but are defined narrowly enough to be specific to the programs.

English	Present original interpretations of literary works in the context of existing research on these works
Environmental Science	Critically evaluate the effectiveness of agencies, organizations, and programs addressing environmental problems
Theater	Use voice, movement, and understanding of dramatic character and situation to affect an audience
Women's Studies	Use gender as an analytical category to critique cultural and social institutions

One advantage of well-written outcomes is that they help guide the choice of assessment methods. It is easy to imagine how the outcomes stated above might be assessed: an English student could write a paper presenting original interpretations of literary works, or a theater student could demonstrate these skills in a performance.

Practical Approaches to Developing Program Learning Outcomes

From the many... one

1. Graphically display all courses – the learning outcomes specified in each course for the program.
2. Identify common themes or elements across the courses.
3. Given these common elements, discuss with program faculty whether these are the most important elements to develop students' knowledge, skills, abilities, and attitudes. Are there some that should be added or deleted? Is there a logical progression in the development of student competencies related to the major, general education, etc.? Is there coherence to the curriculum?
4. Discuss how these relate to the existing program learning outcomes and make refinements. Or, use this as a basis to create new program learning outcomes. Once a consensus is reached, then the discussion can move to methods to assess the program outcomes.

From the one... many

1. Review current program goals/outcomes, perhaps from a recent self-study document or program review. Do they reflect the current mission and priorities of the institution? Is the linkage apparent? Do they reflect current professional standards in the field for courses offered? Are they broad or specific enough to encompass known learning outcomes of the various courses offered? If answers are yes, move to the next step.
2. Given the current program learning outcomes, discuss how these are specifically linked in their course level outcomes. Graphically display their answers for each course.
3. Examine the program curriculum as a whole. Are there holes? Are there any program learning outcomes not addressed by any course or addressed very weakly?

You might work through the following questions

1. What would the ideal graduate of our program look like? What knowledge, skills, abilities, and attitudes would we want them to have?
2. What experiences (assignments, papers, productions, internships, etc.) do students carry out throughout our program that would provide evidence of their achievements?

3. What standards would we expect our students to achieve for those experiences?
4. Can we express those experiences and standards in ways that would both guide our students in determining whether they have achieved what we want and provide us clear criteria for our assessments?

Inventories

1. Review the syllabi for all of your courses to list what is taught in each course. Based upon the review, what appear to be the broad goals or learning outcomes for the program? Create a spreadsheet that lists the broad goals or the learning outcomes in the left-hand column, then list all the courses across the top row, and then note which courses address which goals. Sometimes, doing this curriculum mapping exercise reveals gaps in the program or unnecessary repetition of the same skills in many courses.
2. List all the major assignments and test in all your courses. Given the breadth and depth of all the courses, is the distribution of these assignments appropriate for addressing the learning outcomes you want from your program?

Research

1. Contact colleagues from across the nation to learn what they are doing.
2. Go online to find out what other departments are doing in your field.
3. Note assessment sessions at your national conference.
4. If your discipline has teaching journals, review articles on assessment.

Review

1. Check catalog copy to determine whether you tell prospective majors what they should expect to learn by the time they graduate from your program.
2. Review materials you have already produced such as annual reports, program reviews, accreditation reports, and recruiting materials.

This packet includes resources adopted from the New School, the University of Connecticut, and Linda Suskie, *Assessing Student Learning: A Common Sense Guide*, Second Edition. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2009.

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