Student Learning Outcomes for Degree Programs and Certificates  
Guidelines and Resources for EWU Deans, Associate Deans, Chairs and Directors

A Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities (NWCCU) accreditation site visit took place April 25-27, 2012. In the Year Three Peer-Evaluation Report, the evaluation team expressed the following concern:

EWU should carefully examine student learning outcomes to assure that they are stated in terms of outcomes and thus providing students with an accurate indication of proficiencies and competencies they can expect from a course of study. (NWCCU Standard 2.C.11)

During the 2012-13 academic year, the Director for Learning, Assessment & Instruction will coordinate a review of programmatic student learning outcomes (SLOs) and revision of SLOs where appropriate. Part of this review will be to align the SLOs with the three Core Themes that are included in the NWCCU Year Three Report submitted by EWU. The Core Themes can be found at http://access.ewu.edu/provosts-office/ewu-accreditation-home-page/core-themes.xml.

This document is a compilation of resources designed both to assist Chairs and Directors in developing and/or revising programmatic SLOs and as a resource to assist Deans and Associate Deans in reviewing and approving programmatic SLOs.

Program Outcomes

This well-written description is from Arizona State University (see https://uoeee.asu.edu/program-outcomes).

Program outcomes are the knowledge, skills, and abilities students should possess when they graduate from a program. They are answers to the question, "What should program graduates know and be able to do at the time of program completion?"

When thinking about program outcomes, it might be helpful to consider where program graduates should be within three to five years of graduation. Should they be practitioners in the profession of the discipline? Should they have entered the work force prepared for entry-level jobs? Should they be in a graduate or professional degree program? Should they have passed a licensure or certification exam in the field? The answers to questions such as these can help program faculty focus on the knowledge, skills, and abilities that will best prepare students for their next educational or professional endeavors.

Guidelines for writing program outcomes

1. A program outcome must flow directly from, and support the college and department mission. The connection between the mission and the outcome should be clear.

2. A program outcome must be directly related to the academic discipline of the program. Focus on program outcomes that reflect the specific knowledge and skills you expect students to acquire as part of their educational experience in the program. Avoid program outcomes that are more related to the general education component of an education. Writing and critical thinking, for

1 | Programmatic Student Learning Outcomes Tune-Up – Contact: Dr. Helen Bergland – hbergland@ewu.edu / 509.359.4305
example, are important educational outcomes, but it is unlikely that your program can demonstrate that your graduates acquired their writing or critical thinking skills through their coursework in the program. You may, however, incorporate writing and critical thinking into program outcomes directly linked to the academic discipline of the program.

3. A program outcome must be **observable and measurable**. Write outcomes that are focused on demonstrable behaviors rather than what students *know, think, understand, appreciate,* etc. What someone knows, thinks, understands, or appreciates is invisible and cannot be directly measured. It is impossible to measure an invisible mental quality like a student’s knowledge or understanding. It is possible to measure how well a student solves a problem, presents an argument, or gives a dance performance.

4. A program outcome must be **focused on learning outcomes rather than curricular inputs**. Be sure to focus on the knowledge and skills that program graduates should possess. Resist the temptation to write outcomes about curricular inputs, department resources, faculty characteristics, or instructional methods. Program outcomes are related to demonstrated behaviors of the students who graduate – not characteristics of the program or its faculty.

5. A program outcome must **communicate a single outcome rather than combine multiple outcomes** into a single statement.

**Where to start**

AAC&U offers this advice: Before writing/reviewing “program-level student learning (outcomes), it helps if the faculty have discussed and agreed upon a program mission statement and goals for student learning clearly stemming from the mission statement. … A good mission statement leads with an educational purpose distinctive to the degree and field of student, and identifies the signature feature of the program.” (www.aacu.org/meetings/generaleducation/gened2006/documents/StraightObjectives.pdf)

**Tips and Guidelines**

*This section is from the University of Hawaii: Manoa* (http://manoa.hawaii.edu/assessment/howto/outcomes.htm)

**Why develop and publish programmatic SLOs?**
- Clarify what students should expect from their educational experience
- Encourage students to be intentional learners who direct and monitor their own learning; thus, assisting them to learn more effectively
- Aid faculty in designing integrated programs via sequenced courses and curriculum
- Convey graduates’ skills and knowledge to employers, accrediting agencies, etc.

**Useful question to consider when crafting or revising programmatic SLOs**
- What knowledge, skills, abilities, and values will the ideal graduate demonstrate?
- How will these capabilities be demonstrated?
- How well does the program prepare students for careers, graduate school, professional study, and/or lifelong learning?
- What assessment can we use to demonstrate growth in students’ knowledge, skills, abilities, and values as they progress through our program?

Good outcomes use verbs that describe definite, observable actions
Bloom’s taxonomy is a well-known description of levels of educational objectives. It may be useful to consider this taxonomy when defining outcomes.

(Graphic from http://www.redwoods.edu/Departments/Distance/Tutorials/BloomsTaxonomy/Blooms-Taxonomy.jpg)
Assessment Methods and Approaches


The following list provides an overview of the more common assessment approaches and techniques used for degree-program learning outcomes.

Direct Assessments

Direct evidence of student learning provides demonstrations of what students know or can do with their knowledge. The most effective degree-program assessment plans include at least one, and often two or three, direct assessment measures, because they provide direct evidence of student accomplishments.

Typical direct methods include the following: projects, papers, theses, products, exhibitions, performances, case studies, clinical evaluations, portfolios, interviews, oral exams, essay exams, “capstone” experiences, field research, summaries of electronic discussion threads, scores and pass rates on licensure/certification exams, student reflections on attitudes, values, or beliefs, internship reviews by advisors or supervisors.

Indirect Assessments

Indirect evidence of student learning provides student or employer input on what they believed was learned or accomplished. In addition to indicating what was learned, indirect evidence can often provide answers to why. Such indirect input tends to be less persuasive than direct evidence, given its basis on perception rather than actual products or performances. Still, it can be highly informative if indirect evidence is triangulated to corroborate with findings from direct evidence. For instance, a survey for which students express opinions about their writing or oral presentation skills can be compared with actual direct evidence of student writing or presentations. Such triangulation provides more than one source of evidence regarding a specific learning outcome. The most effective degree program assessment plans tend to incorporate some combination of both direct and indirect evidence.

Some of the common types of indirect assessment evidence include the following:

- Student/alumni satisfaction surveys, focused on their perceived learning
- Exit interviews with Chairs/Directors, focused on perceived learning
- Alumni perceptions of their career responsibilities and satisfaction
- Student reflections, including essays, journals, short “minute” papers (can also double as direct evidence, depending on the intended use.)
- Student ratings of their knowledge and skills, and reflections on what they have learned
- Course evaluations that include questions directed at specific learning outcomes
- Student participation rates in faculty research, publications, conference presentations
- Honors, awards, scholarships earned by students and alumni
- Assignment grades, if not accompanied by a rubric or scoring guide
Checklist for Program Student Learning Outcomes

This checklist is adapted from the University of Connecticut (http://www.assessment.uconn.edu/index.html)

a) Are the outcomes aligned with the mission, vision, values, and goals?
b) Do the outcomes clearly describe and define the expected abilities, knowledge, values, and attitudes of graduates of the program?
c) Are they distinctive and specific to the program?
d) Are they simply stated?
e) Is it possible to collect accurate and reliable data for each outcome?
f) Are the outcomes stated such that related evidence can be gathered by more than one data-collection method?
g) Do the outcomes have only one skill per statement? (If multiple skills are included, the outcome becomes complex and difficult to measure. If you have more than one outcome per statement, divide them into separate statements.)
h) Can they be used to identify areas to improve?
i) Are they written using action verbs to specify definite, observable behaviors?
j) Does the language describe student rather than teacher behaviors?
k) Does the language describe a learning outcome, not a process?

Eastern Washington University

EWU requires at least three SLOs for each Major/Certificate Program and no more than six to be included in the catalog.

Examples of well-written EWU program-level Student Learning Outcomes and how they relate to a-k above:

- Demonstrate ability to use quantitative skills to analyze economic data. (Economics BA)
  o c – the outcome is distinctive and specific to the program
  o e – it is possible to collect accurate and reliable data for the outcome
  o k - the language describes a learning outcome, not a process

- Write clear, well-reasoned proofs. (Mathematics BA)
  o d – the outcome is simply stated.
  o g – the outcome has only one skill per statement

- Design and implement curriculum based on standards, knowledge, skills and professional dispositions... (M.Ed. in Education)
  o a – the outcome is aligned with the program’s stated mission and goals.
  o j – the language describes student rather than teacher behaviors

- Analyze connections among societal structures such as gender, race, class, age and sexuality that contribute to women's oppressions. (Women's and Gender Studies BA)
  o b - the outcome clearly describes and defines the expected abilities and knowledge ... of graduates of the program
  o f – the outcome is stated such that related evidence can be gathered by more than one data-collection method
  o h – the outcome can be used to identify areas to improve
  o i – the outcome is written using action verbs to specify definite, observable behaviors