Developing and Revising Student Learning Outcomes for Departments and Programs

We have designed this handout to help you develop Student Learning Outcomes for Departments and Programs. If you are already convinced about the utility of student learning outcomes, feel free to skip the *apologia (pages 1-3)*. The purpose of the *apologia* is to provide some rationale for the 'why' of this task. Detailed instructions about crafting outcomes start on page four.

An Apologia for Student Learning Outcomes or "Am I Being Asked to Engage in Assessment Theater?"

"Why," you might well be asking, "do we need to review and revise our student learning outcomes? We are professionals. We know what we want from students. Why don't they just leave us to it?"

Fair questions. Student learning outcomes can seem like a part of the assessment-industrial complex. You probably didn't go to graduate school so that, someday, you could worry about the number of verbs in a student learning outcome (which, yes, we are going to ask you to worry about: see below). Moreover, you may believe that student learning outcomes cannot capture much of what we care about—like the student who finally finds a topic she wants to read about in her spare time or the alumna who, 10 years out, at last says, "hey, my professor was right: social inequality is something I should be concerned about." For some of us, crafting student learning outcomes is yet more evidence that our technocratic society is intent on quantifying the unquantifiable and reducing education to a series of banal outputs.

At their best, however, well-crafted student learning outcomes can be helpful. The key is remembering that they are a tool for particular set of tasks. They can help us articulate the skills, habits, and areas of content *over which we as teachers have significant control* and guide us toward regular evaluation of those skills, habits, and areas of content so that we can make improvements in student learning. Student learning outcomes are really bad tools for measuring the life-long influence of a teacher or the moral development of students. When we use them in those ways, things go wrong (so the colleague at another institution who

complained that she was being asked to assess the spiritual maturity of her students using a rubric was right to protest—that is a job for a spiritual director). When we decide to care about only the things that we can assess, things also go badly (because, yes, we need to give time and resources to things we cannot easily measure). When used well, however, student learning outcomes give us some insight into student learning and how to improve it.

Think of it this way: good student learning outcomes are akin to well-crafted research questions. If you are a scientist who cares about climate change, you might have a life goal of "doing something to mitigate climate change." That is a great goal, it is an aspirational goal, but it doesn't tell you what experiment to conduct next or the area that you need to research further. A good research question, on the other hand, helps you explore a discrete piece of the large problem. It helps to focus you. It might give you a thing or two you could do toward the larger problem. Still, you won't, even after all the research, know everything you want to know about climate change and you certainly won't be able to do all of it yourself. You might, after a series of years, need to ask new questions; these new questions might take you in a completely different direction than your original research question. Plus, you know that your research--and research in general--is only one tool in dealing with the problem (we also need activists and policy makers and people who can subtweet problematic EPA administrations). Yet, for all its limitations, a good research question helps you unlock something significant about a topic you care about and lead you (and others) toward productive change.

Likewise, student learning outcomes are tools that give us useful information toward improving the discrete components of a larger set of activities that we, as faculty and College employees, undertake to facilitate students becoming citizens who work toward a just and peaceful world. Outcomes won't tell us everything we need to know or do toward this goal, but they can help us with certain parts of it. A well-crafted outcome might lead us to discover that we need to teach argumentation more effectively or organize content in a new way or drop one requirement and add another. Good student learning outcomes can also provide us with some areas of focus. There is a lot that we could focus on as teachers: writing, deliberation, critical thinking, application, synthesis, integration, transfer. Student learning outcomes name some of what we plan to focus on and work toward improving (if necessary). Although the selected outcomes are not the only things we care about, they do name some of the things that we care about and things over which we have meaningful influence.

That, then, is the apologia. Student learning outcomes are useful tools for particular ends. Used poorly, they can be useless or worse. Used well, they can help us in important but circumscribed ways. They are neither the end of civilization nor a panacea for all that ails

education. Our hope is to aid you in developing them and using them well so that they can be helpful in serving our larger mission.

Characteristics of Useful Student Learning Outcomes.

Your goal is to create four to five outcomes that indicate key skills, habits, and/or areas of knowledge that students will demonstrate by the end of your program. That may sound easy, but good student learning outcomes—like good research questions—take some time to craft. Outcomes that will lead to useful information about student learning should:

Give you information about things you care about.

- We don't want outcomes for the sake of assessment theater. We want outcomes that will generate evidence toward improving student learning in areas that matter to us (although, at the risk of being repetitive, not all of the things that matter to us). If you don't, for instance, care if students can write a journal length article in your discipline, don't make that a student learning outcome.
- Outcomes should correspond to activities that students carry out within your program. If you can't think of a piece of student work that would demonstrate how well students meet the outcome, you either need a new outcome or you need to rethink what you are asking students do. A sure sign of an "assessment theater" outcome is one for which you have to create an assignment or activity which you would not, under any other circumstances, create or care about.

Be assessable.

- Outcomes should use active verbs that indicate what students do or demonstrate. Vague verbs like "appreciate" are harder to assess than "evaluate" or "compare." The point here to create outcomes that give you specific information about (and a specific goal for) student learning.
- You should be able to determine if students are achieving the outcomes through direct and/or indirect evidence (although if all of your evidence is indirect, you should probably reconsider some of your outcomes). Direct evidence means student work. Indirect evidence involves things like surveys, focus groups, interviews, etc. If you have to peer into the souls of your students to determine if they have achieved the outcome, it is not assessable, and we would advise you to rethink your outcome.

Generate evidence that will help you make pedagogical or curricular Decisions.

- If you find that students are not fulfilling the outcome, you should be able to make changes in your courses or your department/program curriculum that will

help them to achieve the outcome. If you have to change society, the structure of K-12 education, or the current presidential administration in order to achieve the outcome, you need to rethink your student learning outcome (although you are, of course, free to work toward all of the above).

Reflect Higher Order Skills

- As outcomes for an entire program or department, these outcomes should focus on higher order skills such as analysis, synthesis, evaluation, and application. Higher order outcomes often demand lower order outcomes (knowing, recalling, identifying), but the final outcomes of a program should themselves be higher order.

Be manageable.

- A program and department should have four to five outcomes. More than that becomes unwieldy.
    - No cheating. Do not put three active verbs in each outcome.
        - Remember that there is a difference between an outcome (one verb) and the criteria that you will use to determine how well the student achieve the outcome. Your outcome might be that "Students will construct an argument based on independent research." To do that at a mastery level, students will need to find appropriate sources, develop a thesis, use evidence etc. etc. etc. Those might be discrete lines on a rubric; they are not all program outcomes.

Remember, your student learning outcomes, do not name all the things you care about. You are not naming all the things you will work on or have conversations with colleagues about. You are identifying learning outcomes that name things you care about *and* that can be regularly evaluated in order to give you helpful information toward improving student learning. Another thing to remember is that, after some period of time and assessment, you can change your student learning outcomes. You do not have to chisel student learning outcomes into a block of stone. Student learning outcomes are typically reviewed on a five to ten year cycle.

How to Craft Student Learning Outcomes:

Knowing the characteristics of good student learning outcomes may be all that you need to get started in revising your existing outcomes or in crafting new ones. But, again, writing good outcomes—like crafting a good research question—can be tricky, so here are a few ideas to help you in the process.

Work backwards.

- Think about what you want students to be able to do by the end of your program? If you have a capstone, think about what you have students produce in the capstone. What skills, habits, or areas of knowledge does it demand? That might not be inclusive of all that you want, but it is a place to start.

Distinguish Criteria From Outcomes:

- Start thinking about the items on your list (see above) relative to the criteria that you would use to monitor/measure them. If you have on your list, for example, "be able to use sources responsibly" and "identify the difference between primary and secondary sources" you might be able to call "identify the difference" a criteria of "use responsibly" (since using responsibly demands knowing the difference). The final outcome would be "use sources responsibly" and one way you would evaluate this outcome is by gathering evidence about whether your students correctly use primary and secondary sources.

Distinguish Course Outcomes From Program Outcomes

- Start thinking about course requirements, relative to program and major requirements. If you have listed several lab protocols the student should be able to use by the time that they graduate, the program/department outcome might be "use the correct protocol" and the individual protocols might be an expectation/outcome of various classes.

Edit.

- Cut things that cannot be measured or that are largely outside of your control. Cut things that will not generate evidence that is useful. These are not

unimportant things, but student learning outcomes are not the proper place to inclusion.

START PUTTING WHAT YOU HAVE IN OUTCOME FORM:

- Students will [active verb] [skill, habit, or content area].
  - Sometimes it is helpful to have a ".....by [however students will demonstrate it]" reference within your outcome, but sometimes that does not provide enough flexibility at the department/program level.
- Examples:
  - Student will be able to interpret religious texts from at least two traditions using modern, scholarly methods.
  - Students will write a journal-length research paper.
  - Students will evaluate the credibility of news reported on Facebook.

Outcomes Checklist:

After you have done all of the above, run through this checklist and revise as needed.

Do you have between three and five outcomes for your department or program?

- If yes, well done.
- If no, add or, more likely, subtract.

Does each outcome have one active verb (or one verb that indicates what the students will do or demonstrate)?

- If yes, well done.
- If no, rewrite.
  (Note: an SLO might have another verb to describe what students will produce ("students will write a research paper using disciplinary conventions") but not multiple verbs for what they will do/demonstrate ("students will identify and evaluate multiple theories of justice and explain which they prefer and why")

Can you identify direct evidence (student work) and possibly indirect evidence (e.g. focus groups) with which you can assess the outcome?

- If yes, well done.
- If no, consider whether the problem is the outcome or whether you need to embed activities related to the outcome in your program. If it is an important outcome, there should be a place in your program where students demonstrate that they have achieved it.

If students are not achieving the outcome, would you be able to make pedagogical or curricular changes to help them? In other words, are you assessing things over which you have some reasonable control?

- If yes, well done.
- If no, rewrite. Remember: you can have lofty, aspirational goals and work toward them without making them into outcomes you regularly assess.

Will Students need to take multiple classes in order to achieve the outcome (at the level expected)?

- If yes, well done.

- If no, you have probably written a course level outcome. Use it for the course and think about the higher level outcome of which this outcome is part.

CAN YOU IMAGINE SPENDING AN HOUR DISCUSSING THE RESULTS OF ASSESSING THE OUTCOME? WOULD IT LEAD TO PRODUCTIVE CONVERSATION WITH COLLEAGUES ABOUT YOUR STUDENTS?

- If yes, well done.
- If no, imagine you are having the conversation over wine and cheese. If still no, it could, of course, be your colleagues (no, really, it's them, not you). But if you can't imagine that looking at work related to the outcome would lead to a productive and interesting discussion about your courses and curriculum, you want a different outcome.

AND, YOU'RE DONE

Well done crafting outcomes. Now comes the fun part. You get to collect student work, review it, and figure out how to help students achieve or better achieve the outcomes. That is the pay-off for this activity. You have a set of "research questions" about student learning that you can ask, research, and discuss. And you can do something productive with the results.