

## Appendix One: Objectives vs. Outcomes

Some of the confusion and/or hostility that people feel about student learning outcomes might be because they're so "future-oriented": they seem to focus on something that might happen, or could happen, rather than on what *is* happening in the classroom or service area. If faculty are the "subject matter experts," hired because of those skills or specialties, shouldn't they just be trusted to deliver that expertise?

One idea to keep in mind about outcomes, though, is that they're *not* "input" or information given by others; rather, they're the manifestation of what students take away. At a recent Basic Skills meeting that talked a lot about how we can improve student success, I came up with the idea of re-naming them as SSOs – student success outcomes, things that could demonstrate how our students actually achieve it.

But whatever you call them and however you think of them, we're under the gun with their inception. Please remember our timeline: we *need* to come up with department (or discipline) and service area outcomes NOW. This is a self-imposed deadline, but since we've adopted it, we've learned from District that our catalogue for Fall 2010 will need to have printed in it those very same program outcomes . . . which means the absolute deadline to adopt them is March of 2009. It would be *much better* to get them done now rather than delay them that long; that way we can devote all of next year – 2008-2009 – to actually assessing the outcomes in our classes and service areas.

So I want to try to explain, one more time, what we're asking. Basically, we're trying to split the difference between [the already-established college-wide SLOs](#) and the so-called "Student Learning Outcomes" that are on every individual course outline on Curricunet.

Let's take the course level first, because it's something that a few of you have had questions about. Why do I use that adjective "so-called"? After all, they're now called "Student Learning Outcomes" right on the course outline, and they use good SLO language – "By the end of this class, students will be able to . . ." – when they're introduced. So why aren't they considered outcomes?

I don't want to get hung up on terminology, but most of what we're now calling "outcomes" on the course outlines are really "objectives" (which is, yes, what they used to be called). The difference is that objectives represent valuable skills, or tools, or pieces of content that enable the students to grasp the subject matter of the course, whereas the outcomes are describing more general, overarching *products* of the course. Objectives might represent our goals for the students, focusing on content and skills important in the

classroom, whereas outcomes are “higher level” skills that might be applied outside of the class as well.

As always, examples might help. If I were teaching an automotive repair class, I might adopt, as one of my outcomes, that students be able to perform a brake job. But along the way to that skill, they’ll have to master a lot of smaller, more specific tasks: they’ll have to differentiate between front brakes and rear brakes, develop knowledge about brake pads and the brake lining, etc. Those smaller, more course-specific objectives are steps along the way to mastering the overall outcome.

Similarly, if an outcome in a word processing class was to gain facility with Microsoft Word, the objectives would include knowledge of copy and paste functions, knowledge of search and replace functions, etc., etc. . . . all steps along the way to achieving mastery of the outcome. They’re measurable, which is important: they’re just not the overall outcome. The outcomes are like those old war horses, “Critical Thinking” or “Communication.”

All of that is important because some of our course outlines have a LOT of these objectives: some as many as thirty! For assessment purposes, that’s a nightmare. That’s why I say again: each department (or discipline) and service area should adopt for itself *no more than five outcomes*. Three are OK as a minimum.

Now let’s shift, for a moment, to the six college-wide outcomes, for another piece of good news. Some people have presumed that they have to come up with outcomes and/or assessment activities that match all of those six outcomes. That’s not true. You should adopt outcomes that have to do with what you actually DO in your classes and service areas.

For example, the music department, besides “Critical Thinking,” has adopted outcomes called “Aural Awareness” and “Aesthetic and Cultural Awareness”: it’s important for their students to identify how music forms an essential part of the human experience. The Physical Education Department, when I talked to them, seemed keen on an outcome called “Kinesthetic Awareness” – they see it as essential for their students to develop a consciousness about how to be healthy as an element of lifelong learning.

And these are the questions you need to be asking yourselves in your next meeting, if you still need to come up with your outcomes. What do we want students to be able to know or do after taking our classes or using our services? Or . . . what would our ideal students know or be able to do by the time they finish our classes or use our services? Or . . . what do we want our students to remember about our classes or services five years from now?

All of these questions are ways to get at what you consider most important for successful students to take away: they're ways to account for what students are actually learning while they're at Mesa. Should we have to account for that? Ideally, no: people should just trust us to perform to our professional capacities. But in the real world . . . in the world we're currently inhabiting . . . DO we have to account for it, even though such measures are invariably artificial? Yes, we do.

And here's my last piece of good news: once we've established these program outcomes, and it comes time, next year, to assess our students in them, we don't have to assess ALL of the outcomes: just one. And we don't have to assess that one outcome in all of our classes, either: just the most heavily-enrolled classes in the department, those most crucial for the major or those that serve as "gateway" classes.

Again, apologies for the length of this letter: I've tried to cover the main questions that I've encountered as I've been going around campus and speaking to different service areas and departments. Please get in touch if you'd like me to visit your meeting(s) or have more questions, and let me and our SLO Committee know about the progress you're making in developing these outcomes.

Thanks a lot,

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