Writing Program Outcomes and Assessment Plans

Program outcomes refer to the broad objectives or goals of a program, particularly as they pertain to the efficiency, quality or productivity of the program. These vary considerably by the program involved. For example, academic programs may be interested in increasing the number of student presentations/publications/performances. They might also want to increase the number of faculty involved (productivity) and/or the rigor of technology-assisted education. Academic program leaders may want to increase the number of students who complete the program per academic year (productivity) or reduce the average time-to-completion through improved advising or academic support (productivity). Alternatively they might want to increase the number (productivity) applicants accepted into a program or raise its academic profile [e.g., SATs, GREs, GPAs] (quality).

These examples all represent common academic program outcomes. However, there are several different types of program outcomes beyond those associated with the programs of academic disciplines. Research units through their support programs, for example, might want to increase the number (productivity), dollar amount and/or type (quality) of sponsored grants/contracts within a program. The academic and student services divisions of the university share administrative characteristics but offer quite different if still critical programs. Academic and student services that support activities across campus include such activities as admissions offices, library and learning/information resources, faculty resource centers, tutoring, writing centers, academic computer centers, student disability support centers, financial aid, residence life, student activities, dean of students’ office, and the like.

Some academic and student support units may offer programs that actually are involved directly in student learning. If so, they should identify, assess, analyze and report appropriate student learning outcomes. Typically, they are not. More commonly though, such support programs involve students and the efficiency, quality or productivity of these activities is of ongoing concern. This might entail the numbers of students who participate in various student service activities or to the percentage of “off-line” target for levels of academic computing network availability.

Many program outcomes focus directly on administrative services. Administrative support service units normally include office and departments such as finance, travel, purchasing, facilities and physical plant. They also include the President’s office, development offices, the research office, and other units that service the overall mission of the university in a more indirect way than academic offices. Not surprisingly, an administrative unit’s objectives are often parts of the university budgeting process or elements of its strategic plan.

FSU’s guidelines on institutional effectiveness requires program outcomes be developed for academic programs, academic and student support units as well as administrative units. Most, in conformance with SACSCOC requirements, pursue a general goal of “continuous improvement.” Recently though, SACSCOC has changed its requirement of purely administrative services (SACSCOC
Standard 7.3). It allows the university to interpret the “expected outcome, standard or target” in a manner consistent with the administrative unit’s role in the institution. Now, it is the university’s responsibility to explain how and why these “expected outcomes, standards or targets” are determined. Such standards are akin to benchmarking efforts where the measurement of the quality of the university’s programs and services is judged in comparison with standard measurements or similar measurements of its peers.

FSU’s guidelines for the number of required program outcomes and their underlying aim are as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of program outcome (PO)</th>
<th>Minimum Number of Required Program Outcomes</th>
<th>Underlying Aim of PO</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Academic program</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Continuous improvement</td>
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<tr>
<td>Academic support degree program</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Continuous improvement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Academic support certificate program</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Continuous improvement</td>
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<tr>
<td>Student services support program</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Continuous improvement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Administrative support program</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Achieving benchmarked target</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

At times, it can be difficult to determine the character of a program. This is especially for some administrative services. As a result, the Office of Institutional Effectiveness, working with the Office of the Provost, will determine the status of each unit’s program with respect to the requirement for submitting outcomes. Program Outcomes are reported in the university’s IE Portal. Its link is:


Program outcomes are recorded using the same template as student learning outcomes and answer the same general set of questions.

1. What do you want? (outcome)
2. How will you measure progress? (assessment)
3. What happened? (results)
4. Why do you think you got the result you did? (analysis)
5. How do you improve or sustain performance? (improvement plan)

As noted above, the university accreditation body has different standards for the different types of program outcomes.
The “expected program outcomes” for administrative units typically include outcomes such as efficiency and quality of service targets (e.g., energy usage, response times, error rates, “clean report” targets, satisfaction rates); monetary targets (e.g., fund-raising targets, research grant targets, auxiliary income targets). It is the institution’s responsibility to explain how and why these expected outcomes are determined.

In some cases, administrative outcomes are hard to separate from student support outcomes. Examples might include library services, which has an administrative function but also generally has a co-curricular student support function. Generally, these “dual function” units would be addressed in SACSCOC Standard 8.2.c (Student outcomes: academic and student services) although SACSCOC strongly suggests the university’s reporting be explained and justified.

Guide to Program Outcomes (PO)

Identifying, assessing and reporting Program Outcomes follows the same general guidelines as those of student learning outcomes (SLOs).

Writing a program outcome statement

- What specific behaviors or skills do you wish to assess?
- Properly developed POs should conform to the criteria denoted in the S.M.A.R.T. mnemonic/acronym. That is, they should be specific (S), measureable (M), achievable (A), relevant (R), and timely (T).

In the Nuventive reporting system used by FSU, each outcome should be given a name, explaining briefly what it concerns. The name provides a shorthand label for the PO. POs that are currently being used by the program are said to be “active.” Ones no longer in use, but maintained for historical purposes by the Nuventive system, are said to be “archived.” The years in which the PO is actively assessed must be noted as part of the Nuventive system which provides an entry prompt regarding the years for which it is active. If a SLO is archived, the Nuventive system asks that the date when the PO is archived be specified. The

In writing a program outcome, it is often useful to begin with an action verb that describes the types of learning expected. General verbs such as “understand”, “experience”, “comprehend”, or “recognize” do not work well because they are difficult to measure. Bloom’s taxonomy is a good place to find verbs that work well. (see Appendix) POs describe what the program directors want the program to achieve or produce. For example,

‘By the end of the fiscal year, the office of purchasing will have received and evaluated competitive bids for all the university’s major purchases on a timely basis.”

SLOs do not set targets or standards. Those appear in the Assessment Statement. Long and compound statements of program outcomes should also be avoided because they too are difficult to measure and are often imprecise. Specific statements are generally better. Program Outcomes will often remain the same from year-to-year. The Nuventive system in the IE Portal continues a PO from one year to the next and assumes they will remain active. The entries in the IE Portal differ in that the outcome year being must be updated to reflect the year for which it is active. Outdated or superseded POs are archived in the Nuventive system.
Writing the Assessment Process

The assessment process answers the question:

- How do you know that progress is or is not being made toward the goals set in the outcome statement?
- There should be an assessment process for each PO.

In order to meet expectations by accrediting bodies and usefulness for faculty, it is necessary to state clearly how you will assess progress in program outcomes. It is necessary to record precisely what you will measure to establish performance, how the information will be collected, from whom it will be gathered, when it will be collected, and who will be responsible for collecting the information. It must also state the specific expectation or level of performance (standard) that the program has for establishing that the program has been successful. These standards are the point of comparison against which the actual evidence of program performance will be judged once it is collected. Remember, for administrative services, program outcomes should set expectations or targets through some form of benchmarking that will be justified in the assessment statement.

Overall, the assessment statement lays out what sort of evidence would convince you that progress is being made toward the desired outcome?

The assessment process statement for a PO identifies the:

- **Specific activities or produces** you are looking for as evidence of the learning outcome and indicate what information you will seek;
- **Standard or criterion or target** against which the outcome will be judged successful;
- Measure and method by which the assessment will occur. The template in the IE portal lists a series of choices from which you can chose (*more than one can be chosen*);
- **Responsibility** indicates who is to conduct the assessment; and
- **Conditions** in which the assessment will occur and the reasons why the specific conditions were chosen.
- **Location** of the services. FSU uses the same POs of a program at all of its locations and regardless of its mode of delivery. Assessment results (*the next section*) vary by site and mode of delivery. The assessment process can vary slightly if, for example, there are material changes in the way in which assessment must be conducted. Results of the assessment vary by campus activities on main campus, distance/online, Republic of Panama or the Panama City Florida campus or the Sarasota Florida campus but a program’s POs remain the same. Separate measurements must be taken and reported in the IE portal results section for each PO on the main campus, distance/online, the Republic of Panama or Panama City Florida or Sarasota Florida. This will require separate result statements for each locality.

The assessment process must be logically linked or aligned with the PO statement.

**Example #1 Writing a Program Outcome Statement:**
In conforming to the template in the IE Portal, proceed as follows:

**Outcome Name:** Improved processing time

**Outcome:** By the end of the fiscal year, the purchasing office will have improved the time it takes to process requests for major purchases.

**Outcome Status:** Active

**Outcome Years(s):** 2017-2018, 2018–2019, 2019-2020

**Outcome Type:** Program

**SLO Outcome Category:** Not applicable

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**Example #2 Recording a PO Assessment Process:**

**Active:** Yes

**Location:** FSU *(This means that the outcome will be assessed in the same manner at all delivery locations and in all modes of delivery)*

**Assessment process:** This will result in 90% of the processing requests for purchase of $50,000 or more being completed and returned to the requesting department within 2 weeks.

**Change Notes (only if appropriate):** Each semester, a standard item analysis will be conducted to identify individual items that need to be replaced and/or reworded.

**Assessment Method:** Departmental records of Log in and Log out

The assessment process should include several features. The Nuventive form has most of the elements. But be sure to include the following:

**Specific Behaviors:** Department of Purchasing requests for purchases of $50,000 or more will be processed in timely fashion as determined by an examination of the disposition log maintained by staff.

**Standard or criterion:** Department actions will result in 90% of the requests being processed within 2 weeks where the standard was derived from a study of peer institutions purchasing units performance conducted through a survey in late 2017.

**Measure and Assessment Method:** As determined by analysis of departmental information on purchase dispositions.

**Time Frame:** At the end of the fiscal year.

**Responsibility:** departmental employees.
**Conditions:** All processing requests were examined and the data entered in a digital record for the fiscal year along with their estimated size and the requesting unit.

**Location:** FSU (all campuses and each mode of delivery by FSU uses the this same PO and same assessment process).

**Writing a Results and Analysis Statement**

The results statement is updated annually. It appears in the Results section of the IE Portal Unit Assessment.

What must be included in the results and analysis statement?

- What were the results when you followed protocol specified in the assessment process?
- Did you or did you not make progress toward your goal?
- Why did you get the results that you did?

The results statement should contain enough detail to determine what the results of conducting the assessment are. In particular, results must be considered against the standards or target you have set. It is not enough to collect simple information and report. The results should be analyzed. Analysis should be used to identify ways in which performance could be improved sustained or, if needed, additional examinations conducted.

Generally, your analysis should state its most valuable finding. It should attempt to explain any deviation from the established standards. It might also report other insights that you have uncovered. It should indicate how such findings might or will be used in making improvements or how it leads to further analysis. It may want to highlight areas of success in addition to areas needing improvement. Importantly, you must not forget to provide some evaluation of the method you used and its continuing status as a tool for assessment of outcomes.

The results statement should address the following requirements:

- **Results** should be summarized and presented in relation to the learning that is desired (*it is helpful to use the same terms in the outcome statement as well as the assessment process*);
- **Reporting Period** lists the year in which results were accomplished
- **Relationship to Standard or target** should be specifically noted;
- **Conclusion or Deviation from Standard or target** clearly indicates to the reader or reviewer whether or not the standard was met (*this is a drop down box in the IE Portal template*);
- **Responsibility** for collection of the data at the correct time from all data sources;
- **Evaluation of assessment method** (where necessary) to ensure it is providing the information needed.
- **Location** (*To what do the results apply? main campus or Panama City Panama or Panama City Florida or online*);
- An indication (of yes or no in a drop down box) of whether the envisioned improvement plan will have a budget impact
- Analysis of Results includes more than reporting of results. It should include the results of internal discussions or investigations regarding the data. What factors contributed to the results both positive and negative. Why did you achieve the results you did. This will help establish changes could be made to improve the program;

  The importance of analysis in the Institutional Effectiveness process cannot be overstated. Please remember that your results should inform decisions that lead to continuous improvement of your program. It forms the link between your data and your improvement plan and should lead the reader from one to the other.

The related documents field associated with each outcome results in the IE portal allows you to upload copies of the assessments you used, including examination items, rubrics, judging criteria. It also lets you store copies of results and analyses that you perform. This is the documentation may be required by accrediting bodies. We encourage you to include information in the repository if the information or analysis is available and provides additional pertinent information.

Example #3 Writing a Results and Analysis Statement:

By the end of the fiscal year, the purchasing office will have improved the time it takes to process requests for major purchases of $50,000 or more.

**Results:** The mean processing time was 2.2 weeks

**Conclusion or Relationship to Standard:** 2.2 (as compared to the standard of 2 weeks) conclusion: target not met

**Deviation from Standard or conclusion:** FSU’s purchasing office had a processing time that was slightly less than the standard for its peer

**Responsibility:** Employees of the purchasing office.

**Insights covered:** Analysis of the processing records indicated that log in and log out entries were submitted regularly and provided a good sense of overall processing.

**Evaluation of assessment method:** The current method of assessing processing time is cumbersome since much of it was done manually.

**Location:** Main campus

**Analysis:** A statistical analysis was done to determine if certain types of items took longer to process than others or were more difficult to enter into the purchasing system. Large IT purchases were found to take significantly more time than more conventional commodity purchases. Current staff performance was judged satisfactory to above average and staff turnover was low.
Writing an Improvement Plan

What must be present in an acceptable improvements plan description?

The template for the Improvement Plan appears in the Results section of the Nuventive Unit Assessment. This is also updated in the FSU IE Portal annually based upon the analysis of results.

The Improvement Plan answers the questions:

- What are those affiliated with the program going to do to improve or sustain performance in the program? Alternately (for program outcomes), what are you going to do to keep your program operating at its high level? Who is responsible?
- It is not sufficient to report that “no improvements are needed and that monitoring will be done.” If no improvements are needed, what will be done to sustain performance and specifically what happens under a regime of monitoring.

The results analysis statement should spur some action to continue improvement. Such improvements might include the need to make changes in the program outcomes. More typically, they will include changes ranging from processing changes to enhancements in support services. They may also require new or modified assessment practices or special attention by the program staff. Please remember if your program is already performing at a high level, you should state how you expect to retain that level of performance. For example, the program will retain an emphasis on frequent feedback for the new processes.

Your statements will provide a record over time of your efforts to improve the performance of your programs. They should be documented carefully and fully. Our record of institutional effectiveness efforts for SACS must show continuous improvement or benchmarking results. If your prospective improvements or action plan requires additional resources, their potential budget impact should be noted.

- Improvement envisioned should be specifically stated;
- Time Frame should be indicated within which the improvement will be implemented;
- Responsibility will identify who should ensure implementation or planning for the improvement is complete (or on schedule);
- Actions to sustain results are required even if you are already performing at a high level; and
- Resources needed should be identified if necessary.

Example #4 Writing an Improvements/Action Plan:

**Improvement envisioned:** Department officials will review existing processes and determine if IT purchases present particular challenges. Staff salaries will be increased to reward performance and to discourage staff turnover. Staff training will be offered on a regular basis.
**Time Frame:** Early in the Fall 2018 semester.

**Responsibility:** The department staff.

**Resources:** Salary increases averaging 3% will be requested in the upcoming university budgeting process.

Once completed, these submissions are reviewed by the person entering the information, the administrative director and, in a few instances, the Provost’s Office.
Appendix

Excerpts from Bloom’s Taxonomy of Measureable Verbs where specific verbs need to be accommodated to program measurement

[Further items can be found online]

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<tr>
<th>ANALYSIS</th>
<th>APPLICATION</th>
<th>COMPREHENSION</th>
<th>EVALUATION</th>
<th>KNOWLEDGE</th>
<th>SYNTHESIS</th>
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