Writing Student Learning Outcome and Assessment Plans

The success of academic programs - all degrees, all certificates and certain student support programs - is measured, in part, through the use of student learning outcomes.

Simply stated, a student learning outcome (SLO) should indicate what a student will be able to do at the end of a program of study that she or he couldn’t do at the beginning of that program of study. It is the knowledge, skills, and abilities that a student has attained at the end (or as a result) of his or her engagement in a particular set of higher education experiences. It should not describe a process.

Student learning outcomes must also be very specific and measurable if their attainment is to be assessed after undertaking a set of education experiences.

FSU has over 1,250 student learning outcomes that are measured annually. Other than providing valuable information to faculty, these reviews satisfy two assessment requirements.

- They are used in our responses toward university-wide accreditation, the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools—Commission on Colleges (SACSCOC) {http://www.sacscoc.org/pdf/2018%20POA%20Resource%20Manual.pdf see for example CR 8.2.c} and
- They are used in State Mandated Academic Learning Compacts (SMALCs) to comply with the requirement for student learning outcomes for all bachelor’s degrees from the Florida Board of Governors (BOG) {https://www.flbog.edu/board/regulations/ Florida BOG 8.016}.

FSU submits a report to the BOG annually and to SACSCOC every five years. For SACSCOC, we provide two years of data.

The assessment process is easily summarized in five (5) 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)

Information on programs from units throughout the university is stored in the Institutional Effectiveness Portal (IE Portal). Its link is:

http://iep.fsu.edu

This link takes you to the software system that maintains information on university student learning assessment. It was developed and supported by the Nuventive Improvement Platform, known as the Nuventive system. The IE portal includes information on both Student Learning Outcomes and Program Outcomes in conformance with university guidelines. Program
outcomes or the consequences of a program are only addressed tangentially in this overview. Program outcomes are required for the SACSCOC 10th year review. While student learning assessments may take place within a course, it is the educational program that is the focus of assessment.

The university guidelines require that program and student learning outcomes be reported annually for each program in the IE Portal. There are no maximums that may be reported, but there are minimum numbers, as follows:

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<th>Program</th>
<th>Minimum Number of Program Outcomes</th>
<th>Minimum Number of Student Learning Outcomes</th>
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<td>Bachelors</td>
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<td>2</td>
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<tr>
<td>Certificate Program</td>
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<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Remember outcomes (certificate and degree) have to be assessed and results reported separately for programs offered on:

- Main Campus
- Panama City, Panama Campus
- Panama City, Florida Campus
- Sarasota, Florida Campus
- Distance/Online Programs

**Guide to Student Learning Outcomes (SLO)**

Identifying and developing student learning outcomes is the first step in the university assessment process used to establish institutional effectiveness. The following explains in detail what we do to comply with accreditation and Board of Governor requirements. It lays out the steps in completing an assessment plan.

**Writing a student learning outcome (SLO) statement**

- What, specific behaviors or skills do you wish to assess?
Well formulated SLOs should conform to the criteria denoted in the S.M.A.R.T. mnemonic/acronym. That is, they should be specific (S), measurable (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 SLO. SLOs 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 SLO 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 SLO is archived be specified. The Nuventive system will also ask, for SLOs, that they be placed into one of three categories: communication skills, critical thinking skills, or content/discipline knowledge and skills. For Bachelors degree, the Florida Board of Governors requires this categorization that is admittedly a broad effort at representing what the outcome involves. One category must be named, but all three can be entered.

In writing a student learning 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) SLOs describe what the faculty wants students to learn in the program. For example,

“By the completion of the course of instruction, students will be able to report research findings on current topics in their field in a manner consistent with professional standards adopted by the program.”

SLOs do not set targets or standards. Those appear in the Assessment Statement. Long and compound statements of learning outcomes should also be avoided because they too are difficult to measure and are often imprecise. Specific statements are generally better. It is not sufficient to say students will have completed or passed a course as indicative of learning. The type of outcome and SLO Outcome Category will be requested in the Nuventive System by a drop down box and should be entered accordingly.

Student Learning Outcomes of an academic program often remain the same from year-to-year. The Nuventive system in the IE Portal continues a SLO from one year to the next and presumes 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 SLOs are archived in the Nuventive system.

**Recording 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 SLO.

Let’s be clear up front, **student grades are not an acceptable** part of a good assessment plan.

Why? Grades are typically summative measures of student performance. They often reflect a whole range of evaluations involving any number of considerations. They do not describe specifically what a student does or does not know or can do. SACSCOC does not accept them as part of the institutional effectiveness process for this reason. The assessment process is intended to provide information or improving learning and teaching and should help design improvements in the learning process. Assessment should help determine a student’s demonstrable ability to perform stated competencies at a desired level.

In order to meet expectations by accrediting bodies and usefulness for faculty, it is necessary to state clearly how you will assess progress in meeting student learning and 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 student learning has been successful. These standards are the point of comparison against which the actual evidence of student learning will be judged once it is collected.

In your most skeptical mood, what sort of evidence would convince you that progress is being made toward the goal?

The assessment process statement identifies the:

• **Specific behaviors** 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*);
• **Validity** of the measure and method used in the assessment;
• **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 learning experience. FSU uses the same SLOs 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, online, Republic of Panama or the Panama City Florida campus but a program’s SLOs remain the same. Separate measurements must be taken and reported in the IE portal results section for each SLO of a program offerred on the main campus, online, the Republic of Panama or Panama City Florida and Sarasota, Florida. This will require separate result statements for each locality.

The assessment process must be logically linked or aligned with the SLO statement.
**Example #1 Writing an Outcome Statement:**

In conforming to the template in the IE Portal, proceed as follows:

**Outcome Name:** Quasi-experimental design

**Outcome:** Upon completion of the program of instruction, the student will be able to distinguish among different types of quasi-experimental design.

**Outcome Status:** Active

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

**Outcome Type:** Student Learning Outcome

**SLO Outcome Category:** Content/Discipline Knowledge and skills

**Example #2 Recording an 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 85% of the students scoring 70% or better as determined by departmental exam. EXP 3000, Approaches to the Study of Behavior, is required of all psychology majors. By learning about research methods and design in psychology, students will be able to read the literature and thereby keep up with an ever-changing knowledge base. By learning about how data are gathered, analyzed, and interpreted in psychology, students will be able to become active participants in research.

All students enrolled in EXP 3000 will be given a exam at the end of the semester to assess their knowledge of research design and quasi-experimental design and analysis. The exam will be constructed by faculty members who teach EXP 3000 at the Tallahassee campus and reviewed by the Associate Chair and Director of Undergraduate Studies.

**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 Exam

The assessment process should include several features. The Nuventive template in the IE Portal will display the elements. But be sure to include the following:

**Specific Behaviors:** Demonstrate competency in basic research design and analysis.
**Standard or criterion:** This will result in 85% of the students scoring 70% or better.

**Measure and Assessment Method:** As determined by departmental exam.

**Validity:** The exam is constructed by faculty who teach EXP 3000 and is reviewed by the Associate Chair and Director of Undergraduate Studies. Each semester, a standard item analysis will be conducted to identify individual items that need to be replaced and/or rewarded.

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

**Responsibility:** Faculty.

**Conditions:** All students enrolled in EXP 3000 will be given a multiple choice exam at the end of the semester to assess their knowledge of research design and analysis. EXP 3000, Approaches to the Study of Behavior, is required of all psychology majors.

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

**Writing a Results and Analysis Statement**

The results statement is up-dated annually. It appears in the Results section of the IE portal Unit Assessment template. What must be included in the results and analysis statement?

- What were the results when you followed 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 academic 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? Programs offered on main campus or Panama City Panama or Panama City Florida or Sarasota Florida or distance/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? An answer will help establish changes that 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.

**Considerations of privacy**

Under state and federal law, the information that can be legally included in the portal is rigorously restricted. Federal and state privacy laws protect student educational records. A university found in violation is subject to severe penalties, including the loss of federal funding. You must be exceptionally careful about the information you submit for entry into the Institutional Effectiveness Portal. As a guide, if a program has fewer than 10 students, extreme caution should be used in reporting such results.

*When in doubt, do not enter or upload information that provides information on specific students.*

**Example #3 Results and Analysis:**

The departmental exam was administered to all sections (3) of EXP 3000 on the main campus at the end of the fall semester. Results indicated that a mean of 69% (62%, 66%, 78% per section) of the students scored 70% or better on the 17 item exam. An item analysis of the exam questions were conducted and it was found that one question had a significant flaw and that there were problems with several others. The exam was
modified, i.e., 3 questions were replaced, 2 questions were reworded, and 3 new questions were added. The 20 question exam was then administered to two of the three sections of EXP 3000 at the end of the spring semester. One section did not administer the exam because of a miscommunication with the instructor. Across both sections, 92.5% of the students (88% and 97% in the individual sections) scored 70% or better on the exam.

**Results:** A mean of 69% (62%, 66%, 78% per section) of the students scored 70% or better on the 17 item exam.

**Conclusion or Relationship to Standard:** 69% (as compared to the standard of 85%) conclusion: Criterion not met.

**Deviation from Standard:** One question had a significant flaw and that there were problems with several others that may have had an effect on the results.

**Responsibility:** Faculty teaching the course.

**Insights covered:** Analysis of the exam uncovered several problems. Faculty concluded the exam had to be modified for future use, i.e., 3 questions were replaced, 2 questions were reworded, and 3 new questions were added.

**Evaluation of assessment method:** An item analysis and expert review.

**Location:** Main campus

**Analysis:** A statistical item analysis of the exam questions was conducted to determine if demographic factors such as gender or ethnicity were significant and should shape future instruction. No significant differences were discovered. However, in addition to several problems with the examination questions, faculty involved in the course reported that frequent practice exercises appear to have had positive effects on student learning.

### 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 question:

- What are those affiliated with the program going to do to improve or sustain learning in the program? Alternately *(for program outcomes)*, what are you going to do to keep your department or 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 specifically 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 student learning or program outcomes. More typically, they will include changes ranging from curricula refinements to proposed new educational tracks to enhancements in support services. They may also require new or modified assessment practices or special attention by the program faculty. Please remember if your program or students are 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 student feedback or the use of practice assignments.

Your statements will provide a record over time of your efforts to improve the learning experiences of students and programs. They should be documented carefully and fully. Our record of institutional effectiveness efforts for SACS must show continuous improvement. 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 Improvements/Action Plan:**

The goal was not met in the fall. This appears to be due to the content validity of several questions on the exam. We replaced these items in the spring, resulting in the goal being met. However, the exam was administered to only two of the three sections, so that we did not assess 100% of the population. The Undergraduate Studies Committee and faculty who teach this course will review the exam early in the Fall 2008 semester to evaluate the validity of the exam and where it continues to assess the most important elements of knowledge we wish students to attain. The exam will be revised as necessary and administered to all sections of this course (we will make sure there is no miscommunication with instructors and that they all understand the importance of administering the exam to their students). Faculty will emphasize practice assignments throughout the course.

**Improvement envisioned:** Faculty members will review the exam and whether it continues to assess the most important elements of the knowledge we wish students to attain. They will discuss whether more feedback on practice assignments will help and are needed.

**Time Frame:** Early in the Fall 2018 semester.

**Responsibility:** The Undergraduate Studies Committee and faculty who teach this course.
Actions to sustain results: practice assignments will remain a faculty emphasis.

Resources: None noted.

Once completed, these submissions are reviewed by the person entering the information, the Department Chair, the Dean or designee and, in a few instances, the Provost’s Office.
Appendix

Excerpts from Bloom’s Taxonomy of Measureable Verbs

[Further items can be found online]

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