

# Guide to Outcomes Assessment of Student Learning<sup>1</sup>

## California State University, Fresno

### Why Outcomes Assessment?

Several forces are driving us towards outcomes assessment of student learning. State legislatures nationwide are expecting greater accountability from academic institutions. The CSU system has committed itself to outcomes assessment through “Cornerstones”. Accrediting agencies, including the Western Association of Schools and Colleges, are requiring outcomes assessment as a part of the accrediting process. It is clear that if we do not seize the initiative, assessment processes will be imposed upon us by these entities or by the legislature. The assessment movement has gone beyond being a fad that will go away if we ignore it.

Taking the view that if we demonstrate commitment to assessment we will be allowed to develop and maintain a program which best reflects our values and discipline uniqueness, **we take as our guiding objective the improvement of student learning through the enhancement of curricula and instruction.** For this reason, outcomes assessment of student learning will take place primarily at the department level, where the information gathered can be used to improve curricula. To encourage honest examination of weaknesses as well as strengths, the data will remain the property of the department and will not be used in the RTP process.

On an interim basis, development of assessment plans will be voluntary. To reduce the workload required for this effort, the university has received permission from the Chancellor’s Office to allow departments to develop an assessment plan in lieu of an upcoming five-year review. In addition, workshops, working group meetings, and other forms of support will be provided to help departments gain expertise in this new area.

## Critical Issues and Definitions in Outcomes Assessment

### The Planning Process

Departments are being given the option of developing assessment plans in lieu of upcoming five-year program reviews. Because systematic assessment of programs through student learning outcomes is a new activity on this campus, participating departments are being provided with

---

<sup>1</sup> This document is adapted from California State University, San Bernadino’s Guide to Assessment of Student Learning Outcomes and Status Report on Assessment Efforts (1996). Members of the Outcomes Assessment Committee were: Claire Purvis, Robert Wilson, Robert London, Kathy Reilly, Elinore Partridge, Sandra Kamusikiri, Terry Hallett, Robert Ricco, Charles Martin, Richard Schwabe, and Jerrold Pritchard. California State University, Fresno contributing authors were Lynda Harding, Dianne Dickerson and Brandt Kehoe. (Revised, 6/99)

three units of assigned time for an assessment coordinator. The assessment coordinator will work with the department to develop the program(s)' mission, goals, student learning objectives, and a five-year assessment plan as described on page six. A three-member assessment planning consultant team will be made available to each department (see page four). In addition, the Administrative Support Team consisting of Brandt Kehoe, Lynda Harding and Dianne Dickerson serve as the assessment planning coordinators for the campus.

Mission Statement, Goals and Objectives

**The Mission Statement** should state the values and philosophy of the department. It should establish the broad directions and aspirations of the department and its programs. There may be language that further defines the mission of each major concentration or degree level offered and reflects the actual educational and career paths of the program's graduates. The Mission Statement should be understandable to new students and persons outside the field.

The **Goals** should focus on the general aims or purposes of the program and curriculum. The goals should state the broad, long-range intended outcomes of the major/concentration, including content knowledge areas, attributes, skills and perspectives expected of program graduates.

A division of goals into three domains is a good starting point:

- Cognitive: What does the student know?
- Performance/Skill: What can the student do?
- Affective: What does the student care about?

**Objectives** are brief, clear statements of learning outcomes of instruction. Attention is focused on the specific types of performances that the students are expected to demonstrate at the end of instruction. While goals express intended outcomes in broad, global language, objectives use more precise terms.

Objectives should be related to and flow from the goals. It is helpful to use a format that lists one or more objectives directly under each goal:

Goal 1	Goal 2	Goal 3	Goal 4	Goal 5	Etc.
Objective 1	Objective 1	Objective 1	Objective 1	Objective 1	
Objective 2	Objective 2	Objective 2	Objective 2	Objective 2	
Objective 3	Objective 3	Objective 3	Objective 3	Objective 3	
Objective 4		Objective 4	Objective 4		
		Objective 5			

Objectives are intended results; outcomes are the achieved result. Objectives take goals to the level of action and "operationalize" the goals. These behavioral objectives may be in some hierarchy from lower level attainment to more complex, higher order skills.

The objectives should focus on the students, rather than the curriculum. It is helpful to use action verbs and statements, such as *identify, explain, translate, construct, solve, illustrate, analyze, compose, compile, design*, etc. rather than vague terms such as *know* and *understand*.

Another useful technique is to describe the objective with “performance indicators” embedded in them. “All graduates will score above the 70th percentile on...” Move from focus on what the program/curriculum requires/provides to what tangible/observable outcomes are expected of your students. Be sure your objectives are assessable.

Another technique for developing your objectives might be to think forward to what is expected in your assessment plan. How will you know students have met your goals and objectives? What are the “performance indicators?” What is the minimum each graduate should know or demonstrate? Then, work backward to see if there are objectives implied in these expected outcomes. Can you tease them out into statements of intention and completion?

### Assessment Techniques

The next step is to select the assessment techniques or measures that will give you the information you are seeking about your students' learning. In the five-year period, at least two techniques must be direct measures of student learning and one, an alumni survey (see attached chart). Best practices include the following:

- utilize data that may already be available to the program, e.g. retention rates, job placement, senior projects or other culminating experiences, etc.,
- use a variety of assessment measures, and
- imbed assessment into instruction to improve student learning and save labor.

Systematically gather data across students using scores on standardized or locally prepared exams or scoring rubrics for performances, projects, theses, etc. Grade distributions alone are not evidence of student learning, but can be valuable when it is clear just what students must do to earn a particular grade (e.g., graded examples of student work at different performance levels).

### Resources

The Center for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning (CETL) has a large number of helpful resources on assessment. In addition, the CETL web site has established links to other universities' web sites that have information on assessment. A number of programs on the Fresno campus have completed drafts of assessment plans that are available as models. However, keep in mind there is no ONE way of doing this. You will discover that the assessment models are as diverse and unique as the programs; this is why there is no recommended "ideal" model for you to follow. It is important that the faculty decide what questions are most important to them, and what is the best way to assess their academic programs.

Program assessment coordinators will meet each month to disseminate information and evaluate progress. In addition, CETL will sponsor several assessment-related workshops. All faculty, not just coordinators, are encouraged to attend these workshops.

### Assessment Consultant Team

As is the practice in program review, an external review team will serve as consultants for each assessment plan. It will be up to the department to recommend at least three individuals for this team, one off-campus consultant within the discipline with some expertise or experience in assessment; one member from within the school, but outside the department; and one from outside the school. It would be helpful if some of the reviewers had experience with outcomes assessment of student learning, and assistance will be provided in finding qualified individuals. A brief orientation/workshop will be held for the benefit of the on-campus members of the consultant team.

A meeting to review the plan with the assessment consultant team needs to be scheduled by the department during the planning semester. You should work directly with your consultants to arrange the details and notify the Assessment Support Team (Dianne Dickerson, Lynda Harding, and Brandt Kehoe) of those plans. The external consultants are expected to work with the assessment coordinators prior to the visit via email or telephone, so that the programs can benefit from their expertise throughout the planning stages.

The department should distribute its full assessment plan to members of the consultant team and to the Assessment Support Team as early as possible, but at least a week prior to the site visit.

Suggested itinerary for the assessment consultant site visit:

8:00 – 9:00	Team meets with department assessment coordinator(s)
9:00 – 9:30	Team meets with Assessment Support Team in TAd 130
9:30 – 11:30	Team meets with department faculty
11:30 – 1:00	Lunch
1:00 – 1:30	Team meets with Assessment Support Team in TAd 130
1:30 – ?	Team prepares written report

The consultant team will write a report outlining their recommendations and submit it to the department with a copy to the Associate Provost. Departments/programs should respond to the report and/or revise their assessment plan before submitting a final copy to the Associate Provost's Office. Graduate degree programs should also submit a copy to the Associate Dean in the Division of Graduate Studies.

### Policy on Assessment Plans

The final draft of the assessment plan will be sent to the Undergraduate Program Review Committee or the Graduate Committee for review. Accepted assessment plans will be published for campus use, providing models for other departments to follow. Assessment plans are to be considered living documents, to be revised in response to assessment results and as circumstances change. Assessment results (data) are the property of the department and do not have to be reported unless the department and/or faculty wishes to do so (see attached *Policy on Student Outcomes Assessment Data and Information*). However, departmental annual reports are expected to include reports of assessment efforts undertaken and of changes (if any) made in the program as a result of those efforts. Future program reviews will

include a discussion of all assessment efforts since the prior program review or plan development, resulting program changes, and revisions in the assessment plan itself.

## Components and Format of Assessment Plans

1. Departmental/program mission statement. (Do your best to complete this quickly. Do not fall into the trap of debating the wording of the mission statement *ad infinitum*.)
2. Goals, each followed by specific objectives.
3. A matrix showing where in the program each objective will be met:

	Objective 1	Objective 2	Objective 3
Course 1	X		
Course 2	X	X	
Course 3		X	
Sr. Project			X

4. Assessment plan, including schedule and methods or measures to be used. Each plan is to incorporate 1-2 measures per year for a total of 7 or 8 during the five-year period before your next program review. Two of these must be direct measures of student learning (see attached chart), and one must be an alumni survey. It is recommended that the first survey ask alumni to assess the value of the program's goals and objectives. A survey of employers and/or potential employers of your graduates should be considered if appropriate to your discipline.
5. For each assessment activity, who will do the assessment, collect, and analyze data?
6. How and to whom will assessment results be reported? How will data be used to improve the program and revise curricula?

### Questions to keep in mind as you develop your program's assessment plan:

- What assessment techniques are most appropriate? (See examples attached of possible assessment methods and techniques.)
- How will I know when (or if) our majors have met the objectives?
- What evidence do/will I have of the level of achievement or quality of our graduates?
- How will I be able to collect data on program effectiveness?

- What performance indicators can I use? Are there indirect evidences of quality I can use as part of the assessment process? (Employer satisfaction, acceptance in graduate/professional schools?)
- At what points in the curriculum can we do 'formative' assessment? Is there a course that already collects information that would be useful to add to the final 'summative ' assessment file?
- What assessment techniques are most appropriate? (See examples attached of possible assessment methods and techniques.)
- Are there ways that assessment processes can be simplified and/or built into the operation of existing courses?

## Criteria for Review of Mission, Goals and Objectives Statements

1. Is the document clearly written in terms that can be understood by students, faculty outside the discipline, and the public?
2. Do the objectives relate back to the goals?
3. Are the objectives concrete and specific enough to be measured and evaluated? Do they lend themselves to assessment of tangible student learning outcomes?
4. Are there enough objectives to evaluate the entire degree program? Are there too many to measure? Is more focus or detail needed?
5. Are there objectives for subprograms (options, specializations, tracks, emphases, etc)?
6. Are undergraduate and graduate goals and objectives delineated separately?
7. Do the goals and objectives reflect the uniqueness or special characteristics or strengths of the program?

Overall, is the document:

- \_\_\_\_\_ Ready to proceed to development of assessment plan, criteria and methods
- \_\_\_\_\_ In need of minor revisions, formatting changes or cleanup of text
- \_\_\_\_\_ Marginal, needing substantial revision before proceeding to assessment plan
- \_\_\_\_\_ Unacceptable, needing to be reworked and resubmitted.

## Criteria for Review of Program Assessment Plans

1. Are Goals and Objectives clearly labeled and listed?
2. Have criteria to be used and levels of achievement expected been identified?  
Are there one or more stated learning outcomes for each goal? (Other than completion of a particular course or series of courses.)
3. Are assessment methods adequate to measure student achievement?  
Are multiple measures used?  
Is there over-reliance on a single type of measure?
4. Is the time frame described appropriate and workable?  
Are diagnostic or baseline data collected?  
Are growth and improvement expected?
5. Are formative and summative methods of assessment used?  
Are students provided early warnings and directions for change?
6. Is it clear who will do the assessments, collect and analyze data?  
Is there appropriate faculty involvement and sharing of task?
7. Will data be used to inform department and curricula for possible improvement?  
Is there a formal mechanism for reporting results of assessment and for summarizing results?
8. Does the plan appear feasible, workable and affordable, given resources available?

### General Comments on the Assessment Plan

### Suggestions for improvement or clarification

Overall, is the plan:

\_\_\_\_\_ Acceptable as is; ready to carry out assessments

\_\_\_\_\_ In need of minor revision

\_\_\_\_\_ Unacceptable in present form