Format for writing student learning outcomes

First year students	
Graduating seniors	who
Students	

participate in	activity
engage with	program
complete	course, curriculum, pedagogy
	X counseling sessions

will be able to

| identify |
| list |
| describe |
| summarize |
| discuss |
| explain |
| demonstrate |

| at least… |
| with X% accuracy |
| more/fewer than |
| all |

| intended elements |
| as demonstrated by |
| [as required by] |
| external standards |

| interview |
| observed behavior |
| journaling |
| blog |
| portfolio |
| post-survey |
| performance |

ASSESSMENT OF ACHIEVEMENT OF STUDENT LEARNING OUTCOMES

ASSESSMENT is a process of collecting information (data) to document what is, or what happened. In relation to student learning outcomes, the assessment component is a process of determining the extent to which students achieved the desired outcomes.

It is <u>not</u> a grading system, and an assessment report is not like a school report card. Assessment is an organic part of the work of each department or unit; it is one major way in which we gather essential feedback about the effectiveness of programs, services, and activities. Assessment supports quality improvement and strategic planning.

Just as student learning outcomes are derived from the mission and purposes of a department, rather than from the functional processes of that department, assessment of student learning outcomes focuses on the effectiveness of programs, services, and activities, rather than on whether, how, or in what way those programs, services, or activities occurred.

Table I below illustrates the differences between student learning outcomes and performance and suggests the role of assessment in each.

Table I | Student Learning Outcomes v. Performance Metrics

Student Learning Outcomes	Performance Metrics Functional Indicators Operational Processes
Derived from mission and purposes (Institution, Division, department/unit)	Derived from description of the work of the department/unit (programs, services, processes, activities)
Measure contributions to student learning (did students experience a transformative activity?)	Measure performance of the work (did students complete a task?)
Achievement = Effectiveness (were we effective in promoting student learning in this area? Can we show that students are somehow different as a result?)	Achievement = Productivity, Satisfaction, or Accomplishment (did we do what we said we would do; did students come? Did they like it?)
Require criteria to define levels of effectiveness	Require criteria to define levels of performance

Individual and collective feedback to shape department/unit programs and divisional activities and priorities	Individual feedback to shape department/unit systems
Assessment: how effective were we?	Assessment: how well did we perform our tasks?
Is the train headed in the right direction?	Is the train on time?
Are students learning something?	Are students satisfied with our programs and services?

Assessment of Student Learning Outcomes: Components

The first step in assessment is to determine with as much precision as possible what, exactly, is being assessed – that is, against precisely what desired outcome is achievement being measured?

Review the learning outcomes you have developed and chosen to assess in the coming academic year.

For each outcome, please note:

o Target group: all students, or some demographic, institutional, or functional sub-set of students. Examples: all first time entering freshmen, or all students who participated in a certain activity, or students who had counseling intakes on Fridays during the first semester.

o Note exactly how the *capacity* desired is described in the outcome. As precisely as possible, note what it is that students will learn to do, or know, if they achieve this outcome.

o Note what action a student must take to demonstrate achievement of the outcome – e.g., describe or explain something, exhibit a certain behavior, complete a task.

o Note what modifiers apply to the desired capacity – e.g., a certain minimum number of examples that must be given.

o Note any *externalities* that apply – such as guidelines from a professional organization – that will affect assessment against the outcome.

The next step is to figure out what the process of assessment will be, and how it will be accomplished. **Table II** provides a list of the components that should be accounted for and addressed in planning the assessment process.

Table II | Assessment Components

Who is/are the assessor(s)?	Who is competent, capable, and appropriate to observe achievement against the outcome? ○ Department/unit professional staff ○ Department/unit support staff ○ Student employees ○ Students themselves ○ Faculty members ○ Employer ○ Parent
What exactly will be assessed?	Determined by comprehensive review of the learning outcome, as described above
How will achievement be assessed?	What method will be used to measure and document achievement? ○ Pre/post survey (knowledge gain) ○ Post/pre survey (attitudes, beliefs) ○ Post survey (student self-assessment) ○ Direct observation ○ Interview ○ Product (manuscript, dairy, journal, work of art, performance...) ○ Indicators (things that would not change absent a change in the process itself)
What criteria will be used to determine achievement?	○ Satisfaction of mandated requirement ○ Number of examples, etc., given ○ Ability to "hit" some minimum number of key points in a required description, explanation (such as explaining the purpose of a major building on campus) ○ Observed performance of certain actions or statements
Which, and how many, students will be assessed?	Not so much about the demographic issues as how many students must be assessed over what period(s) of time? How many students must be assessed to meet the need? To get that number, what should be the frequency and range of the assessment process?

When to do the assessment?	o Which month, semester, academic year o What day(s) of the week o What time(s) of day?
Where to do the assessment?	Given the method chosen, timing of the assessment, and choice of students to be assessed, where should the assessment be done? How will privacy be protected?
What technology will be needed?	Will the assessment require any specialized technology? o Email surveys o Students "fill out" form/assessment instrument on PDAs o Web survey o Recording of meeting or interviews
How will the results be recorded?	If the method is not a survey or other form for students to complete, how will the results be recorded and archived?
How will the results be verified?	Will students be provided a preliminary report of the findings and invited to review them and evaluate their authenticity?
How will the results be reported?	o Verbal report o Summary in a document o PowerPoint presentation o Spreadsheet
What resources will be required?	Can the assessment be accomplished as planned within the usual budget, by usual staff members, during regular hours – or must the assessment plan include a request for additional resources? Would it be helpful to have partners?
Review	Final review of the assessment plan to eliminate ambiguities and confusion.

Table III | Sample Form for Student Learning Outcome Assessment Plan

Student learning outcome
Who is/are the assessor(s)?
SLO review: What will be assessed?
Methods: how will achievement be assessed?
Assessment criteria
Which, and how many, students will be assessed?
When will the assessment be done?
Where will the assessment be done?
What technology will be needed?
How will the results be recorded?
How will the results be verified?
How will the results be reported?
What resources will be required?
Review

Table IV below illustrates how such a form might be completed:

Table IV | Example Assessment Plan

Student learning outcome	Housing residents will have their doors locked on 65% of routine inspections.
Who is/are the assessor(s)?	○ Housing professional staff? ○ Housing support staff? ○ CAs or ACAs?
SLO review: What will be assessed?	Whether doors in residence halls were locked when tested by assessors.
Methods: how will achievement be assessed?	Door-to-door testing of door locks
Assessment criteria	Whether or not door is locked
Which, and how many, students will be assessed?	○ All rooms in all residence halls ○ Even numbered rooms in (all) (some) residence halls ○ All rooms in residence halls in which thefts have been reported
When will the assessment be done?	Between 2 and 5 PM Mondays and Thursdays during four weeks of the fall semester
Where will the assessment be done?	Residence halls
What technology will be needed?	None
How will the results be recorded?	Check off results on form/grid
How will the results be verified?	Review preliminary results with small group of students living in housing
How will the results be reported?	Written summary of results – number of locked doors/number of doors
What additional resources will be required?	None
Review	Done

DEVELOPING LEARNING OUTCOMES THAT WORK

TEN SUGGESTIONS

1	**Start** by asking: What should students know, be able to do, or be able to demonstrate when they have completed my program/activity/course/project? If you can't answer this question, you can't establish a learning outcome.

2	Things will go better if there is a **common format** for student learning outcomes across the Division; reaching consensus about the default format is an important early step.
	
	 ❖ Suggested: students will be able to…
	
	    ✓ …identify the most appropriate policy or procedure that pertains to their university concerns
	
	    ✓ …identify the most appropriate office, person, or resource related to their university concerns
	
	    ✓ …articulate research ideas in an oral presentation format

3	Clearly differentiate **student learning outcomes** (which are measures of achievement) from **assessment of student satisfaction, program evaluation**, and **purely process measures** (such as taking attendance). Process measures are important, too (they measure effectiveness); we just do not want to confuse them with outcomes.
	
	 ❖ These are not learning outcomes:
	   ▸ Engage in events that promote the appreciation and respect of cultures represented in the campus community
	   ▸ Attend at least three evening programs sponsored by residence life staff
	   ▸ Rate the guest speaker on sexual assault at least 4 on a 5-point scale
	
	 ❖ If possible, collect these two very different kinds of data on different instruments, or at different times, or in different ways
	
	 ❖ Especially: don't collect student self-assessments of learning outcomes immediately after asking them to rate or evaluate programs; salience effects may materially undermine the quality of the results

4 **Focus** on a smaller number of high priority outcomes

- ❖ The division, or a department/unit, may have a large catalogue of student learning outcomes in which it is interested – but it is difficult, and often wasteful, to try to assess all of the outcomes in the catalogue every year

- ❖ The process of setting priorities among learning outcomes is itself valuable

- ❖ Thinking through exactly what outcome is desired may produce consistency among departments, and better data for the division

  - ‣ Demonstrate knowledge of issues related to diversity locally, regionally, and nationally.

  - ‣ Articulate awareness of specific social issues in the local area.

  - ‣ Articulate a sense of the local issues related to diversity.

- ❖ Attending to a smaller number of outcomes will lower the burden of assessment and record-keeping on both students and staff

5 When developing learning outcomes, locate them in broad categories (domains and sub-domains), and link them to overarching institutional priorities/outcomes.

❖ But please don't just list all the domains that a department thinks its work addresses and all the outcomes it thinks it produces; associate each outcome with specific domains and subdomains

  ‣ Does not work: Gain self awareness of personal abilities...develop skills to be successful in work environment...utilize creative problem solving and critical thinking...all listed as associated with **cognitive** and **interpersonal** domains

❖ All of the domains should be associated with university-wide objectives and outcomes

❖ After writing outcomes, review them for assignment to the proper domains/ subdomains

  ‣ Does not work: Develop an "individual quality of work" standard consistent with the University Center's mission and philosophy...listed as associated with **cognitive** domain

  ‣ Works: Ability to work as a team member...listed as associated with **interpersonal** domain.

  ‣ Works: Effectively articulate a conflict management plan listed as associated with interpersonal competence

6 Make student learning outcomes **as specific, focused, and clear as possible**; vague, general, or blurry outcomes are difficult to assess and unconvincing when described.

❖ The less specific an outcome is, the harder it will be to measure

	Very hard to assess	...students will be able to have more confidence in their abilities.
Example 1	*Hard to assess*	Demonstrate critical thinking skills, such as problem analysis, judgment and decision-making as they relate to social issues.
	Easier to assess	Students will demonstrate the ability to analyze and respond to arguments about racial discrimination.

Example 2	*Hard to assess*	Develop problem-solving skills and conflict resolution skills.
	Easier to assess	Residence hall staff will be able to assist roommates in resolving conflicts by helping them negotiate roommate agreements.
Example 3	*Hard to assess*	...value exercise as a stress reduction tool
	Easier to assess	...will be able to explain how exercise affects stress

❖ Putting too much into an outcome makes it hard to assess [issue is not intent; issue is workability]

    ▸ Identify and articulate how stereotypes impact potential interactions, dialogues, and exchanges among different gender, class, race, and ethnicity, language, nationality, sexual orientation, age, religion, or spirituality, disability.

❖ Domains and sub-domains can be less specific, because they are comprised of many very specific outcomes

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7 On the other hand: excessively precise, personalized outcomes are hard to generalize and measure

❖ Don't equate personal goal-setting with establishing learning outcomes

    ▸ Personal goal: ...able to participate in physical activities at least 3 days per week

    ▸ Learning outcome: ...able to establish a personal exercise program consistent with current professional guidelines.

8 Don't establish outcomes that cannot be evaluated.

❖ Outcomes that are hard to evaluate often are too broad and general

▸ ...will be able to connect to the University community

▸ ...will be able to approach problems more constructively

▸ ...will be able to use effective coping skills

▸ ...will learn about the ethical behaviors expected during the job search in areas such as resume development, interviewing, and accepting job offers

▸ ...will develop an appreciation for diversity

▸ ...will demonstrate an ability to navigate various aspects of the adult world including reporting a belief in the ability to achieve academic and life goals

▸ ...demonstrate skills which are transferable to graduate school and their career plans

❖ Corollary: don't use terminology that makes a solid outcome difficult to evaluate

▸ Hard to evaluate: Able to understand the skills needed for academic success.

▸ Easier to evaluate: Students will be able to identify their own needs for assistance in writing by self-referring to...

▸ Hard to evaluate: ...will be able to apply disseminated information in a future career

9 When creating learning outcomes, build in the basic methods of assessment; actively consider how you will evaluate achievement.

10 Specify the level, or audience, for each outcome; some learning outcomes make sense when applied to freshmen, but not to seniors, for example.

PRACTICAL GUIDE TO WRITING STUDENT LEARNING OUTCOMES

Question	Example
1. What activity, program, service, curriculum, course, or intentional experience provides the opportunity for learning to occur?	• A workshop on men's health offered by health promotion • An appointment with a career counselor intended to help students identify their Holland typology • An honors course on ethics in the workplace co-taught by a professor in humanities and the director of Greek life • An alternative spring break experience • A series of individual personal counseling visits
2. What group of students will participate in the learning experience?	• Entering first-time-in-college students • First year students • Sophomore students who have not yet declared a major • Graduating seniors • Students participating in a leadership development curriculum
3. What new capacity is being sought?	• Ability to invest in positive interpersonal relationships • Increased locus of control in regard to choosing and declaring a major course of study • Ability to consider how personal decisions in the workplace are informed by one's sense of ethics • Ability to explain one's skills to a potential employer • Ability to identify, describe, explain, or demonstrate leadership skills

Question	Example
4. How will achievement of that capacity be demonstrated?	• Identify characteristics of healthy and unhealthy relationships • Describe characteristics of healthy and unhealthy relationships • Explain how career interests and personality type are interrelated • Discuss how drive for success can influence ethical decision-making
5. Through what medium (or by what method) will students demonstrate new capacity?	• A one-page post-workshop reflection paper • A brief interview • Observed behavior or performance • A class presentation that is peer-evaluated with peers using a rubric • A blog that, using predetermined criteria documents' the lessons learned during the alternative spring break experience (e.g., the impact of college students devoting a week to cleaning and refurbishing an elementary school's playground; the lessons learned by assisting in the organization of an AIDS Walk, etc)
6. What range of achievement satisfies the desired outcome?	• Name 4 out of 5 predetermined characteristics of the relevant concept (e.g., healthy relationships, ethics, etc) • Complete with 80% accuracy the development of a large-event organization checklist • Demonstrate at least 2 out of 3 desired leadership characteristics
7. What, if any external requirements, guidelines, or standards apply?	• Cardiopulmonary Resuscitation (CPR) guidelines • Council for Advancement of Standards in Higher Education (CAS) standards • SCUBA training certification requirements

Format for writing student learning outcomes

	who			will be able to
First year students		participate in	activity	
Graduating seniors		engage with	program	
Students		complete	course, curriculum, pedagogy	
			X counseling sessions	

				as demonstrated by
identify	at least...	intended elements		interview
list	with X% accuracy	as demonstrated by		observed behavior
describe	more/fewer than	[as required by]		journaling
summarize	all	external standards		blog
discuss				portfolio
explain				post-survey
demonstrate				performance