

Putting Learning Outcomes into Words

At the beginning of every semester, you probably think about your courses in terms of what you want your students to be able to accomplish by the end of the semester. These are usually broad statements that relate to the integration of several concepts and skills. In educational terms, we usually refer to these statements as outcomes. While each of these statements defines what we want our students to attain, none of them are specific enough to be measurable. So how do these relate to program assessment?

One of the first stages of the program assessment process is to revisit the outcomes identified by your department when it became a degree-granting program. These are the statements that identify what concepts and skills students should attain by the time they graduate. Like the outcomes for each of your courses, these program outcomes specify what the overall curriculum intends to accomplish. For example, an outcome that could be applied to any program at Clayton State University would be, "The program will produce graduates who can think critically, solve problems, and make appropriate decisions." If you analyze this outcome, you will notice that while it refers to critical thinking, it does not specify the measurable components that would need to be achieved in order for a student to become a critical thinker in your discipline. You might need to revise the outcomes from time to time in order to see if they are meeting the current needs of graduates in your discipline. It is helpful when you are writing outcomes for your program to use the following questions to guide your writing:

- What are the needs of our graduates upon completion of a degree in our discipline?
- Are there specific accreditation or certification requirements for our department and/or college?
- Are there any recommendations for outcomes that have been developed by professional organizations in our field that are aligned the outcomes we want our graduates to achieve?
- Are there any recommendations made by business and industry that could translate into outcomes for our program?

Here is a list of some sample outcomes from various disciplines:

Communications: Graduates will demonstrate an *understanding of the diversity of groups in a global society and their relationship to the field of communications.*

Comparative Literature: Graduates will *obtain a global awareness through a wide range of international literary and language experiences* that are critical in today's world.

Biology: Graduates will have the *ability to design and conduct experiments* as well as *analyze and interpret data*.

Physical Therapy Assistant: Graduates will be prepared to *understand and implement the interventions* that are described by a physical therapist.

Physics: Graduates will acquire the *theoretical and experimental background* for work in areas such as acoustics, astrophysics, biophysics, chemical physics, computer science, mathematical physics, and engineering.

Psychology: Graduates will *understand and generate applications of psychology to individual, social, and organizational issues*.

The important take-away here is to keep in mind that outcome statements usually put into words the over-arching knowledge, skills, and attitudes (in italics above) that relate to your program. Once these outcomes have been defined, you need to specify what each of the broad areas entails by writing measurable learning objectives. While your learning objectives could be written at the program level, it is usually easier to focus on learning objectives at the course level because the courses in your curriculum are designed to help students achieve the program outcomes.