

Student Learning OUTCOMES @ South Mountain C.C.

Helping our students climb higher

Issue 2 April 2010

Writing SLOs

Each course should have two to four student learning outcomes. An outcome should state the expectation of student performance, describing what a student can do with what he or she knows. Outcomes focus on lasting results of the course, program or institutional mission. Consider the formula:

**Students will be able to <action verb>
<something>.**

A nutrition class may have objectives of:

- Explain the basic concepts of scientific method as applied to nutritional information
- Identify the relationship between nutrition and other factors in maintaining optimal health and nutritional status during the lifecycle
- Use food guides, diet planning principles, nutrition-related tables, food labels, and/or exchanges to plan, calculate, and/or evaluate food and beverage intake.”

But a student learning outcome for the course might be, “At the end of this course, the student will determine an appropriate strategy to correct a documented nutritional problem.”

The outcome spotlights a practical skill in a real-life situation extending outside of the classroom. It maintains a broad perspective and is not descriptive of the specific methodologies or techniques, though the student should have been exposed to numerous skills, resources and areas of knowledge in achieving it.

The Curriculum Challenge . . .

From Objectives to Outcomes

Does covering material during a course guarantee that students learn it? Does an ‘A’ on a transcript mean that students have mastered the course material? Of course not - there is often a disconnect between teaching and learning. How well do we as faculty know that our teaching methodologies are achieving the goals and outcomes we set up for our students? Furthermore, how do we demonstrate that to our external stakeholders – the prospective students, parents, the administration, the community at large, and the Higher Learning Commission in our next accreditation visit?

A New Focus on Outcomes

In 2003, all seven regional accrediting agencies in the United States agreed on principles of good practice that “would make the focus on student learning outcomes central to the accreditation process.” The old measures used to be grades and retention, but there is now an increasing emphasis on students emerging from courses having the integrated higher learning skills of Bloom’s taxonomy that they can demonstrate to others in a variety of contexts and scenarios. Experts are agreeing that these demonstrations are the proof that students have truly learned and achieved success in their courses and programs of study, and ultimately that the institution has succeeded in its educational mission. The accrediting agencies are targeting these outcomes in the general education core, but are also looking for cognizance of student learning outcomes (SLOs) at the program level of a student’s area of focus.

Objectives v. Outcomes

Almost all of the instructional councils in Maricopa develop competencies or objectives for courses as part of the curriculum process. These objectives focus on what the student will demonstrate in the classroom in a given situation. It is not unusual for a course to have ten to fifteen or more prescribed objectives of intended student results. They are often very specific in scope. Outcomes, on the other hand, describe the most significant and essential learning that student actually achieve and can reliably demonstrate at the end of the course (or program or degree), ideally in a variety of contexts. Amy MacPherson likens outcomes to the “big picture” items that a faculty member focus on in an elevator conversation when responding to a prospective student who has just asked, “What will I learn in your class?” or “What will I be able to do as a result of taking your course?” The chart at the top of the next page summarizes the differences between objective and outcomes.

(Continued on page 2)

From Objectives to Outcomes

(Continued from page 1)

The Importance of General Education Outcomes

Students sometimes view the general education core classes of their degrees as extraneous to the courses of their majors, especially those in occupational and professional programs. But the student learning outcomes emphasized within the general education core are aimed at preparing students to more easily adapt in an ever-changing, diverse and complex world. The general education outcomes promote lifelong learning and fine tune the skills of perception, analysis and expression, skills which can help students achieve greater accomplishments and more in-depth study in their major and ultimately in their profession and in life in general. Our general education offerings should help prepare them to live productive, socially responsible lives while being engaged in their communities, recognizing the importance of cultural contexts, possessing a disposition towards intellectual resilience, and having the necessary skills to adapt to new environments by seeking answers to intellectual challenges, and expressing viewpoints.

The Higher Learning Academy Team is comprised of:

Mr. Stephen Hustedde
Dr. Helen Smith
Dr. Terry Leyba Ruiz
Dr. Matthew Cooper
Ms. Amy MacPherson

If you have any questions, suggestions, or concerns, talk to any one of us! This initiative should involve the entire campus, so we welcome your feedback and ideas!

Objectives	Outcomes
Focuses on Intended Results	Focuses on Achieved results
Specific and discrete (often lesson-specific)	Broader aspects (Higher level skills integrating the content)
Can be achieved in a short time frame (even a class period)	Accomplished over time in several learning experiences
Tend to be statements of intent, not necessarily suggest demonstration	Refers to demonstrations of end-stage performance
Needed for course success	Needed for career / life success
Can be many	Should be few ("the big picture")

Our Institutional (Gen. Ed.) Student Learning Outcomes

As part of our Higher Learning Academy for Assessment of Student Learning cohort involvement, the project team identified four academic Student Learning Outcomes tied to our general education curriculum:

- **Critical and Creative Thinking**
- **Quantitative Analysis**
- **Information Literacy**
- **Written and Oral Communication**

The project team is currently working with the instructors and division chairs of our top ten enrolled college level and top ten enrolled developmental courses to write student learning outcomes for each course. These courses align very well with the declared "general education" core of our degrees. Once the course-level SLOs are developed, the courses can be mapped to our four General Education outcomes, and we can then develop or obtain instruments to assess the level of student success in these four areas.

In addition, a fifth outcome called "**The SMCC Experience**" will be developed combining academics and Student Services processes to promote student personal growth, evaluate student satisfaction and engagement in learning and personal development both in and outside the classroom. It will address empowering the learner, verifying readiness for the next step after graduation, global awareness, cultural sensitivity, ethical courses of action, civic responsibility and setting educational, personal and career goals.

Linking General Education SLOs to All Courses

Our outcomes of thinking critically and creatively, performing quantitative analysis, finding pertinent, contemporary, and accurate information, and communicating well orally and in written form should all be aimed at helping our students develop strong transferable skills that can be applied both intellectually and practically in a wide variety of real world situations. All classes at South Mountain should reinforce these critical skills and provide opportunities to demonstrate their mastery in a variety of settings. To that end, we envision all courses will infuse one or more aspects of our 'gen ed' outcomes into their curriculum. It is a big task, but it's doable. Lorain County Community College in Elyria, OH recently completed writing outcomes for over 900 courses, mapping most courses to one or more of the institution's general education outcomes.