

Assessment 101: Understanding Assessment Terms and Topics

WEAVEonline[®] Assessment Management System

MISSION/PURPOSE

A mission statement articulates the purpose of a unit or program. The mission statement declares what the unit or program does and what it intends to achieve. Often a mission statement carries an implicit statement of the values the program espouses, as well as the relationship the unit or program has to the institution as a whole.

The mission statement for an institution is usually the product of thoughtful collaboration, often with official governance approval before adoption. The mission/purpose statement for a single administrative unit or academic program usually does not take such a formal route. Instead it is often a simpler assertion, articulated by those most closely involved with the unit or program and accepted by those who have responsibility for oversight of that unit or program.

An academic program mission/purpose statement should identify what the program will help students and others learn and do within a particular context and state how the program contributes to its wider communities. An administrative unit mission/purpose statement should focus on the reason the unit exists within the institution, the people it serves, and the value its work brings to the institution.

A mission/purpose statement should be specific, identifying the important things a unit or program does that separates it from others. Consider how each of the following general statements defines the program or unit and gives direction to its work.

Poor: *“The CCC program provides exemplary education and service for students and the local community”*

Better: *“The CCC program designs and delivers both theoretical and practical educational experiences in [specific areas] to develop graduates with the knowledge and skills expected of professionals in the field.”*

In this academic example of a better mission/purpose statement, faculty would be led to identify both theoretical and practical educational experiences in the academic program and to write student learning outcomes/objectives for the specific knowledge and skills needed by graduates.

Poor: “The EEE unit provides excellent services to the college.”

Better: “The EEE unit provides effective and efficient registration services to students and academic programs.”

In this administrative example of a better mission/purpose statement, the unit concentrates on service standards and the value it delivers to both students and academic programs.

A well-written mission/purpose statement should lead to identification of the goals and outcomes/objectives that will guide the future work of unit or program.

GOALS

Before identifying the specific outcomes/objectives that a unit or program will work to achieve, it may be useful to identify goals. These are broad statements about the desired ends to which a unit or program aspires.

Goals are usually too general to actually guide assessment practice, but they can provide a bridge between the mission/purpose statement and the outcomes/objectives that specify the most important work of the unit or program.

Goals are less precise than clearly measurable outcomes/objectives. Goals for student learning might include such broad general education ends as *critical thinking* and *enhanced communication skills*, while administrative goals might include such broad intentions as *improve quality*, *increase efficiency*, and *establish a positive climate for student development*.

Unlike outcomes/objectives, goals are not uniformly a part of the assessment process. In one case, a college may establish institutional goals to convey the shared work of its educational community. In another instance, a university may decide to leave it up to individual areas to determine whether goals will be part of the assessment process. In a third case, a community college may prefer to skip the goals step altogether.

Important Note

Language relating to outcomes/objectives is not consistent across accrediting bodies, regions, states, or even institutions.

OUTCOMES/OBJECTIVES

An outcome or objective is a statement of intention, describing a task to be accomplished or a point to be reached. Well-formulated outcomes/objectives meet what have been called SMART criteria – they are **s**pecific, **m**easurable and verifiable, **a**greed upon, **r**ealistic and yet rigorous, and **t**ime-bound. [modified from George T. Doran, There's a S. M. A. R. T. Way to Write Management Goals and Objectives, *Management Review (AMA Forum)*, November 1981, pps. 35-36]

Outcomes or objectives may be for a single year or cycle (e.g., *establish an on-line course evaluation survey instrument that prompts students for feedback on course effectiveness by May 1, YYYY*) or may continue for more than one cycle (e.g., *increase enrollment by 10% over the next three years in order to better meet the current demand for professionals in the field*). Active verbs describe the action that is intended. Some outcomes/objectives will be ongoing (e.g., *Facilities management will design and maintain classroom areas that facilitate successful teaching and learning*).

STUDENT LEARNING OUTCOMES

Student learning outcomes identify knowledge, skills, and abilities students should gain or improve through engagement in an academic program or other learning experience. Student learning outcomes are typically the most important outcomes for an academic program.

Historically, many faculty members have not been asked to identify learning outcomes, except as they applied to individual courses. The development of student learning outcomes for a program requires faculty discussion and clarifies for both the program's faculty and its students what characteristics are expected in those who finish the program. Student learning outcomes also should be SMART: **s**pecific, **m**easurable and verifiable, **a**greed upon, **r**ealistic and yet rigorous, and **t**ime-bound.

In some instances, student learning outcomes may be expressed in a manner that identifies how the knowledge and skills are expected to develop over the course of the program. Some professional accrediting bodies, for example, require the identification of skills expected of entering students and again at identified places as those students progress through a curriculum.

In **writing student learning outcomes**, it is helpful to begin by saying “*Students (or program completers) will (or will be able to)...*” You should use action verbs to describe what students will know and be able to do (e.g., *Graduating students in CCC*

will be able to identify complex problems during their final internships and then make appropriate referrals to existing community services).

The key to a good outcome/objective statement is the verb. However, some verbs that are linked to learning, such as *understand* or *know*, are poor choices in an outcome/objective statement. Instead you should select verbs that focus on observable and measurable action, such as *describe* or *demonstrate*. Using an Internet search engine, you can easily find various lists of “action verbs for learning.”

Good outcome statements lead directly to identifying relevant measures for gauging the program’s success in producing program completers that display **expected** characteristics.

ACTION PLAN TRACKING

There are two types of situations that call for the development of an **action plan**. Assessments could reveal that one area of service or of student learning needs particular attention. For example, an assessment of some written work from students found an uneven use of proper source citation. Since students should be able to understand and use professional standards for writing, program faculty decide to make proper citation of sources a grading criterion for written work in all courses.

A situation might also arise where an academic program or administrative unit should take advantage of a new opportunity. For example, a community recreation facility opens near campus, and there may be internship opportunities for students. The head of the career services office decides to establish an exploratory group of faculty and staff from relevant areas to meet with the leadership of that facility.

Once the decision has been made to address performance problems revealed by assessments or to take advantage of other opportunities in order to enhance an academic program or administrative area, development of an action plan can begin.

Before determination of a specific plan of action, it is important to review multiple sources of evidence. For example, students' problem-solving skills in a particular area are disappointing. Results of a course evaluation show that students complained about a service-learning situation that required the use of those very skills. The students reported that previous classes had focused on memorizing rather than on solving practical problems. As a result of these two pieces of information, the faculty decide to introduce more practical learning situations, building students' problem-solving skills through work in a progression of courses.

The next step includes asking these questions:

- What are the details of the action plan?
- When should the action plan be implemented?
- What kind of priority will the action plan have in relation to other activities?
- What person or group will be responsible for implementing the action plan?
- What additional resources will be needed to complete the plan?
- What budget amount should be requested?

Answers to all of these questions can reside in the WEAVEonline Action Plan **Tracking** section.

Putting an action plan on a list (or a shelf) is not how programs and services improve. Results come from action plan implementation. WEAVEonline has a place for Action Plan Notes to allow tracking of the plan as it develops. If it is like many plans, there will

be adjustments along the way. Reviewing the notes over time will indicate how a program or service is progressing in terms of implementation. The real test, of course, is whether there is any improvement in performance on relevant assessments.