

Guide to Student Outcomes Assessment at California State University, Fresno

Introduction

The assessment of student learning, student development, and program outcomes is essential to the health and vitality of academic programs at California State University, Fresno. The purpose of implementing student outcomes assessment is to advance student learning through improved curricula and instruction. Accreditation agencies for various professional areas as well as the institution itself all have assessment standards that require the connection of student performance to a program's stated mission, goals, and objectives. Links to specific [accreditation agencies](#) are provided as examples of assessment standards in different fields.

Planning at the programmatic level to assess student learning outcomes is reflected in the program's Student Outcomes Assessment Plan (SOAP) which should be maintained at the school/college level and updated annually to reflect assessment activities and results and changing circumstances. All SOAPs should include, at a minimum, the program's purposes in its mission and goals statements, a comprehensive curriculum map augmented with assessment techniques and timelines, clear and specific plans for assessment activities to be conducted, and summaries of what results have been found and changes made resulting from assessments already conducted. Now that every academic program has a SOAP, the emphasis is on how programs can use assessment results to improve curriculum and delivery of the program. The purpose of this guide is to assist campus personnel as they actively maintain and update their program SOAPs.

I. Programmatic Purposes

Programmatic purposes should be expressed in clearly written statements that convey the overall mission, goals, and objectives the program intends to deliver. Connecting these to the underlying curriculum is a valuable exercise, which will be captured in the curriculum map described below. Programmatic purposes are addressed below.

A. Mission Statement

A program mission statement should state the values and philosophy of the program. It should be sufficiently expansive to provide rationale to the underlying curricula and establish the broad directions and aspirations of the program and any particular degree options or concentrations within it and align with the school/college and University mission statements. Where degree options or concentrations exist to allow students greater focus in one area of the program, specific language should further define the mission of each major concentration or degree level offered, reflecting the actual educational and career paths of the program's graduates. The mission statement should be understandable to new students interested in the area, professionals operating within the field, as well as persons outside the field. The program description in the General Catalog should reflect the mission of the program and its concentrations. A link to a program [mission statement](#) is provided as an example.

B. Goals

The goals should state the broad, long-range outcomes that support the program's mission, including content knowledge areas, performance expectations, and values expected of program graduates.

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

- Cognitive: What do graduates know?*
- Performance/Skill: What can graduates do?*
- Affective: What do graduates value?*

Links to definitions and illustrative verbs are captured behind the asterisks above (*). A link to a **goal statement** is provided as an example.

C. Learning Objectives

Learning objectives are brief, clear statements of learning outcomes of instruction that are related to and flow from the program goals. While goals express intended outcomes in broad, global language, ***learning objectives use precise terms that focus on the students***, rather than the curriculum. Learning objectives should be written using active verbs, such as: *identify, explain, translate, construct, solve, illustrate, analyze, compose, compile, design*. Specific use of verbs such as *to know* or *understand* should be avoided, since they are too vague to provide needed clarity.

Accrediting bodies, professional organizations, or disciplinary groups may already have drafted learning outcomes in your discipline that can be adapted to reflect your program mission and goals. Some programs find it useful to form a “collective resume” as a tool for developing statements of goals and objectives. A collective resume, written as if to potential employers, describes the abilities of a typical graduate from the program. Some programs find it useful to hold a brainstorming session in which faculty members write learning objectives that are then organized into groups from which program goals are formulated. A link to a set of **learning objectives** is provided as an example.

D. Curriculum Map*

Tying program goals and learning objectives to the curriculum can allow for an integrated evaluation of what students in the program should know and when they should know it. A course-by-objective matrix can make clear those courses in which students are introduced to learning objectives and those in which those objectives are reinforced and finally polished. Curriculum maps typically designate objectives introduced in a course as an “I,” reinforced in a course as an “R,” and polished to advanced understanding as an “A.” As a result of developing a curriculum map, some programs find that objectives central to the field were not adequately addressed in the curriculum, leading to important revisions in the curriculum. Once a curriculum map is developed, proceeding to planning assessment activities may be clarified. A link to a **curriculum map** is provided as an example.

II. Assessment Activity Planning

While all programs now have a Student Outcomes Assessment Plan (SOAP), *the mission, goals and objectives for the program are considered living documents to be revised in response to assessment results and changing circumstances*. Planning for assessment activities then is an on-going activity that entails routine maintenance. Some accrediting bodies require more activity on an annual basis, but a general target for campus programs is to complete at least one assessment activity each academic year, *with follow-up indicating the findings of the activity and the changes that are made as a result*. All program SOAPs should be updated every year, which should be documented at the time of your program's routine program review. Be sure to review the Policy on the Procedures and Guidelines for the Periodic Review of Academic Programs, APM 220, found at: <http://www.csufresno.edu/aps/apm/220.pdf>. The policy establishes the procedures, timelines, and reporting outlines required for the conduct of routine program review.

A. Establishing Priorities

Since the purpose of outcomes assessment at California State University, Fresno is improving student learning, the first step in developing and updating a program's SOAP is to decide upon the questions to which answers are most needed. It may not be possible to determine in timely fashion the extent to which students achieve all of the learning objectives the program has identified. In this case, priorities need to be established and scheduled across the next 5 – 7 years, the period over which routine academic program review is conducted.

B. Selecting Assessment Techniques

With program priorities established, the next step in developing and updating the program's SOAP is to identify both the objectives to be assessed and the technique(s) to be used that will give you the information you seek about your students' learning. Data may already be available to the program that document student performance, such as senior projects and culminating experiences, internship evaluations, job placements and even recruitment patterns and retention rates. Programs should employ a variety of assessment techniques. A link to a table of [assessment techniques](#) is provided as an example.

At a minimum, academic program faculty should plan, conduct, report, and reflect the results of at least one assessment activity in every academic program in every year. Across the 5 – 7 year period over which routine academic program review is conducted, at least two of the assessment activities conducted must utilize direct student assessment techniques. Specific accreditation agencies may require more frequent use of direct measures of student learning.

1. Direct Student Assessment Techniques*

In contrast to opinion surveys and instruments that gather self-reports and/or third-party reports of student knowledge, direct measures of student learning are generated when students are evaluated in their performance of a stated objective. To obtain a direct measure of student learning, systematically gather data across student performances using scores on standardized or locally prepared examinations or activities, or scoring rubrics for performances, projects, theses,

etc. If you choose to base your assessment in part on culminating experiences or portfolios, be explicit in explaining how the products of these activities will be analyzed.

2. Indirect Student Assessment Techniques*

Usually founded in survey activities, indirect learning assessment techniques gather measures from students about their self-reported progress of learning, what experiences students attribute their learning to, how students feel about what they know, and what students value as a result of their educational experiences. In addition, third-party reports of what students know and can do may represent an indirect assessment technique if the reports gathered are generalized assessments of student performances. Use of alumni surveys and employer surveys are encouraged as valuable indirect assessment techniques.

3. Program Assessment Techniques*

Program assessment techniques can extend beyond assessment of specific student learning objectives. Program assessment techniques are valuable sources of information and may include retention rates, pipeline analyses*, community interactions, student ethnicity, student research activities and other program activities.

C. Augmenting the Curriculum Map

A course-by-objective curriculum map should make clear where in the program students are introduced to (*I*), reinforced on (*R*), and polished on (*A*) stated learning objectives. Additional columns can be added to the matrix to designate the *assessment activity planned, the timeline anticipated, and, as the activities are undertaken and completed, a brief listing of findings and changes made as a result.* Link to an [augmented curriculum map](#) is provided as an example.

1. Course-Embedded Assessment Activities*

Use of an assignment, examination, or project in a particular course can be an effective means by which to gather evidence of student learning. Not only does it save student and faculty time by making an activity serve multiple ends, arguably the greatest benefit of embedding assessment activities in courses is the motivation it provides students to give the activity a high priority in order to achieve a course grade. In addition, use of a common assignment, examination or project applied across multiple sections of the same course can unify otherwise disparate sections of the course by measuring common learning objectives in the same way. *Powerful results can be generated if student work is evaluated in a common way and accrued across multiple sections of the course in the same term or across multiple terms in which the course is offered.*

2. Programmatic Progress Checks*

Progress toward achieving stated learning objectives and program goals can be evaluated at a specific level of student development within the program. Rather than embedded within specific courses, student outcomes assessment activities can be planned at key transitions within a program, such as junior rising tests, when students are given a performance assessment as they enter their junior year,

or senior culminating experiences*, when students are given a performance assessment as they conclude their educational experiences in their academic program. Caution should be used when planning student outcomes assessment activities outside any particular course, however, to carefully articulate consequences to student participants that guarantee a high level of student motivation to perform well on the planned activity.

3. Activities Timelines*

For each of the next 5 – 7 years, create a separate timeline to indicate what assessment activities are to be conducted in each year and who has major responsibility for conducting each. Each activity should also reference what learning objective is involved and what assessment technique is planned. These activities will reflect the priorities established by your program. Once your timeline is established, cross-reference your planned activities back to augment your curriculum map, noting for each prioritized learning objective what activity is slated and what semester it is scheduled to be done.

III. Implementing the Program SOAP: Closing the Loop

As a part of your SOAP, describe what program assessment activities were schedule for this year, what activities were conducted, and, if changes were made to the schedule, what factors affected the changes in plans. What results were found? What recommendations were made as a result of considering the assessment data? What changes occurred in the delivery of the program as a result of those findings and recommendations? Explicit discussion should be captured in the annual update to your SOAP that details these processes annually.

Describe the process(es) in place to ensure that assessment data are used for program improvement. Do the program faculty meet to consider assessment results and program planning? Does a curriculum committee meet to discuss and recommend program changes based on assessment outcomes? Is a task force established to complete particular assessment-related activities? Be sure to review the Policy on the Procedures and Guidelines for the Periodic Review of Academic Programs, APM 220, found at: <http://www.csufresno.edu/aps/apm/220.pdf>. The policy establishes the procedures, timelines, and reporting outlines required for the conduct of routine program review.