What are academic program level student learning outcomes?

Academic program level student learning outcomes (SLOs) are clear, concise, measurable statements that describe what a student should know and be able to do at the completion of their degree program.

Why are SLOs important?

SLOs can help students learn more effectively, as they clarify what students can expect from their chosen academic program and encourage them to be engaged and self-directed learners. SLOs can assist faculty members in designing courses and course-level SLOs that connect to the larger curriculum and programmatic design. It also makes the skills and knowledge of graduates clear to potential employers and other outside constituents.

Choosing a Manageable Number of Outcomes

Best practices recommend defining four to six outcomes for both courses and programs. Naturally, faculty hope that their students will learn far more than what can be defined in four to six outcomes, but remember, you are defining a manageable number of essential outcomes.

Consider the following questions:

What are the essential things that students must know and be able to do by the end of your academic program?

What measure will give the best evidence that a student is attaining an outcome? Will the measure also indicate the degree to which the outcomes are attained?

From whom will assessment evidence be gathered? From all students or only some?

At what frequency will assessment measures be administered? Who will review and report on the evidence gathered through the assessment measures?

Avoiding the Blank Page

If you are starting from scratch, try to begin with resources you already have. For example, you could look at course level objectives for courses in your program and translate those up to program level outcomes. You could also look to your professional associations or societies to see how your discipline has defined its learning outcomes.

Additionally, knowing how your colleagues at other institutions are articulating their program level SLOs can be very valuable. You can also borrow from resources such as the Association of American Colleges and Universities Essential Learning Outcomes and VALUE rubrics.


Program level SLOs should be neither too broad nor too specific. Describe what students will learn, rather than what you will cover as a faculty member. For example:

1. Students will understand economic arguments. (This statement is too vague. How will you measure this? What kind of economic arguments?)
2. Students will evaluate current economic events in Brazil and describe how the government is developing specific economic policies. (This statement is too specific. This might be more applicable at a course level.)
3. Students will be able to apply empirical evidence to evaluate the validity of an economic argument. (This statement strikes a good balance between too broad/vague and too specific.)

Examples of clear, measurable program level SLOs:

- Students will use technology to effectively analyze and communicate information.
- Students will collect, analyze, and interpret data relevant to test a hypothesis.
- Students will analyze and interpret texts using written or oral arguments with appropriate support.

There are key elements that each SLO should have. Consider the ABCDs:

**Actor**
In most cases, this is the student or graduate. SLOs are about the learning that students will demonstrate, not the courses, services, or experiences a program will provide. Each statement must have an actor. For example, it is common practice to begin statements with “Students will be able to...” or “Graduates can...”.

**Behavior**
What will the student be able to do to demonstrate the knowledge or learning? Strong SLOs use active verbs (See Bloom’s Taxonomy Handout). Every SLO must have behavior(s) specified.

**Condition**
In what format or context will the student demonstrate the learning? For example, if students are demonstrating learning through an e-portfolio, then the e-portfolio is considered the condition. A condition could describe resources (like an e-portfolio platform) which a student would need to access in order to achieve the SLO. An SLO may or may not have a condition, depending on the context.

**Degree**
This is the criteria or standard for performing the task well enough. For example, if you ask students to do a task with 80% accuracy, this would be the criteria for performing the task well enough. Degree is often used in course level SLOs but may or may not be used in a program level SLO, depending on context. It may be understood that for a specific program level SLO, students should meet the objective all of the time.

*Note: Ordering of these different elements may vary.*

**Example of a Program Level SLO:**

Students will **create** a research portfolio that demonstrates the capacity to carry out original research in the field.

**Note:** There is no degree on this program level SLO because it is implied that the student either meets the objective or they do not.

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**Words to Avoid:**
know, learn, understand, appreciate, be aware of, explore, become familiar with, gain insight of, realize

*Note: These words make SLOs difficult to measure. See Bloom’s Taxonomy Handout for measurable verbs.*