

Objectives or Outcomes?

In a previous email, I described the assessment process as consisting of the following steps:

1. Identification of purpose and goals
2. Identification of student learning objectives/outcomes
3. Identification of the student learning activities that lead to the achievement of the objectives/outcomes
4. Determination of the assessment methods for measuring the level of achievement of the objectives/outcomes
5. Identification of the expected levels of performance for each assessment method
6. Implementation of the learning and assessment activities
7. Gathering of data
8. Analysis and interpretation of the evidence
9. Identification of strengths and areas for improvement
10. Identification and implementation of changes for improvement
11. Reiteration of the assessment process

I noted that each component within the curriculum exists for some purpose, and that purpose should be described within a purpose statement. A purpose statement allows us to make explicit to others what the academic program is, what it does, and for whom it does it. I also noted that purpose statements sometimes include program goals, which provide impetus for planning and continuous improvement efforts. Program goals, according to my definition, state what the program wants to accomplish or become over time. Goals are used for planning, decision-making, resource allocation and priority setting. In this message, I would like to explore the next step in the assessment process - student learning objectives and outcomes.

If you look at a number of college's assessment plans, you will probably see that some institutions require their programs to identify student learning objectives while others insist on student learning outcomes. What is the difference between the two?

For many practitioners of assessment, the difference is between what we intend students to learn and what students actually do learn. Using that distinction, an objective would signify what faculty intend students to learn and the outcome would be what students actually did learn. However, in a competency-based curriculum, like our WAC, an outcome represents what learning a student must actually be able to demonstrate (at a specified level of performance) in order to meet program requirements. Some consider the difference between objective and outcome as what we hope our students will learn (objective) and what we require our students to learn (outcome). Others consider objectives to be similar to short-term goal statements. In this definition, objectives signify steps that must be accomplished in order to achieve a goal. These objectives may be accompanied by outcomes which identify what concrete evidence will be used to determine whether the objectives have been obtained.

In my opinion, the distinction between a student learning objective and a student learning outcome is somewhat fine and, for our purposes, it isn't really that important whether you call it an objective or an outcome. What is important is that the program has identified the knowledge, skills and dispositions that they expect students to learn as a result of their successful completion of the curriculum, and that they are engaged in a documented process for gathering data about the extent to which students have achieved those expectations and use that information for improving the learning experience. However, since Morningside considers its curriculum to be outcome-based, it would be best if we were consistent in using the term "student learning outcomes" in our documents.

As always, I would be glad to hear from anyone with views that differ from those I have expressed, or have questions.

Next time: writing student learning outcomes.