COD PORTAL   Outcomes & Assessment ▶ OAC Handbook

OUTCOMES & ASSESSMENT HANDBOOK

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The Basics

What is outcomes assessment?
Outcomes assessment is a collaborative process of inquiry regarding student learning outcomes, followed by analysis, reflection, and action. The goal of outcomes assessment is to improve student learning and improve instructional programs. Outcomes assessment is not individual student, faculty, course, or program evaluation. Student learning outcomes are statements of what students know or can do upon successful completion of a course or program.

Outcomes assessment is a continuous cycle.

It can be easy to get caught up in the data-gathering phase and lose sight of the holistic process. Data-gathering is just one step in this process.

How can I be involved in outcomes assessment?

All full-time faculty participate in outcomes assessment acitivities. The OAC committee has defined course and program level outcomes assessment activities for full-time faculty consisting of the following:

    Participate in at least one program-level outcomes assessment project for the year

    Implement at least one action to improve student learning as suggested by assessment project results

    Identify course-level outcomes that align with program-level outcomes, where applicable

    Revise course and program-level outcomes, as needed, to ensure that all outcomes are current and assessable

    Participate in the development or revision of a comprehensive plan to assess all applicable program-level outcomes

Glossary of terms

[glossary of terms]

What is a learning outcome
Student learning outcomes (SLOs) provide direction for all instructional activity. They are statements of what students know or can do upon successful completion of a course or program.
SLOs should specify an action that is:

    Observable

    Measurable

    Performed by the students (rather than by the instructor)

SLOs should be:
Broad in focus and describe the learning that results from the course/program rather than explaining specific details, skills, etc.
    Not so good: diagnose cylinder head, valve train, engine block, cooling, fuel, electrical, and exhaust systems.

    Better: perform a general engine diagnosis. (Observable & Measurable)

Learning-centered rather than teaching-centered
    Not so good: this course will teach students to select scholarly literature in the field of human geography.

    Better: select scholarly literature appropriate for analyzing a current issue in human geography. (Observable & Measurable)

Specific, using verbs that describe exactly what the learners will be able to do upon completion of the course/program. Avoid using vague verbs that are difficult to measure, such as know, be aware of, appreciate, learn, understand, comprehend, and become familiar with.

> Not so good: Understand how to measure with a ruler.

> Better: measure the length of a common linear object to the nearest millimeter. (Observable & Measurable)

Anchored by an active verb that specifically describes what the subject of the sentence is doing. Bloom's Taxonomy identifies active verbs for different thinking skills (basic, cognitive skills to complex, higher-order or critical thinking skills.)

> Not so good: Understand how professional organizations are similar and different.

> Better: compare and cotnrast relevant professional organizations. (Observable & Measurable)

Measurable; suggesting an assignment or test that will clearly refelct achievement of skill/knowledge/ability. Good outcomes should make assessment easy.

> Not so good: know how the digestive system works.

> Better: illustrate how food is processed through the digestive system. (Observable & Measurable)

Program assessment vs course assessment

Student learning outcomes (SLOs) should provide direction for all instructional activity. These outcomes can be assessed at different levels: they are statements of what sutdents know or can do upon successful completion of a course or program.

Program-level assessment is used to determine how well the program as a whole prepares students to achieve the learning outcomes. It can also be used to identify curricular gaps.

Example program-level assessment questions include:

> Do the courses, individually and collectively, contribute to the program outcomes?

> To what degree are students achieving our program outcomes? Are there any areas of concern?

> Is the program organized in a way that prepares students for industry employment?

> Are our graduates adequately prepared toenter their transfer programs?

Common program-level assessment tools include:

> Capstone projects or a capstone course

> Portfolios

> External performance assessment (i.e. internships and service learning)

> Employer surveys

Course-level assessment is used to determine how well all sections of a course prepare students to achieve course learning outcomes.

Example course-level assessment questions include:

> How well are students achieving the course learning outcomes?

> Are the assignments helping students achieve the learning outcomes?

> To what degree are students prepared for the following courses in the sequence?

Why Should I Do Outcomes Assessment?

Who benefits from outcomes assessment?

The short answer is: everyone. The purpose of outcomes assessment (OA) is to enhance student learning. It's that explicit focus on student learning which makes OA a tool with many uses.

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Primarily, OA produces reliable information that allows faculty to have meaningful conversations about how students are learning in the classes, then make informed decisions about how to better produce such learning in the future. By documenting student learning, OA projects also provide a picture of how that learning can be impacted by areas outside of instruction: staffing, facilities, scheduling, advising, etc. In this way, administrators and staff are able to see how their support of instruction impacts student learning and can make similarly informed decisions about how best to continue that support.

For this reason, OA provides valuable evidence to external accreditors that the college is engaged in meaningful reflections that place student learning at the heart of its purpose. The broader community benefits from OA in this same way, though explicit evidence of the knowledge and skills that the college is producing to the benefit of its surroundings.

Lastly, but crucially, OA benefits students. After all, their learning is the focus of OA work. Our underlying question--how we can best enhance student learning—is the common engine for all OA projects, ensuring that students' experience is given absolute priority in the daily work of the college.

Student learning, retention, and completion

Retention and completion are often thought of as separate issues from outcomes assessment, unrelated to the learning that takes place in a classroom. The reality, however, could not be further from the truth. More accurately, student retention and completion are better understood as products, or effects, of student learning.

Barriers to student learning are undeniable and obvious barriers to course and degree completion. What's often missed, however, is the way that enhancing student learning can lead to increased retention and completion. A robust body of research suggests that a student who can successfully learn and progress in a class is far more likely to persist in, and complete, his or her path of chosen study. In this way, OA – by providing evidence of student learning and identifying barriers to that learning – is a key element of any successful bid to raise student retention/completion. Put simply, the learning comes first.

From teacher-centered to learning-centered

Perhaps the most important benefit to participating in OA is that it sponsors meaningful, valid conversations among faculty about their teaching practices. A great deal of faculty development, however, is framed as "teaching improvement." While this is undeniably a vital element to maintaining qualified and effective practitioners, by focusing on student learning, OA offers a subtle, but critical, shift in thinking.

Generally, this shift in thinking moves our attention away from the means (teaching) and toward the end (learning). While a faculty member might walk away from a lesson fully confident in the effectiveness of her pedagogical approach, OA instead focuses on the students' experience of that lesson. Teaching and learning are, admittedly, intrinsically-linked sides of a single coin. However, the learning-centered approach made possible by OA allows faculty to look past the strategies they employ in the classroom and to think more concretely about the effects of those strategies on their students.

Strategic planning and outcomes assessment

COD aims to employ a coordinated set of strategies to produce an agreed-upon, shared set of desired outcomes. Every strategy and initiative undertaken as a part of the college Strategic Plan can, and will, be assessed by its impact on student learning. OA, in this way, provides a consistent baseline for what can otherwise become a tangled mass of unconnected, vague attempts at "improvement." Student learning—as measured through outcomes assessment—will be an overriding indicator of the success of COD's strategic plan.

Accreditation and outcomes assessment

External accreditors benefit from, and therefore require, outcomes assessment. For this reason, accreditation is frequently cited as the main impetus for conducting OA work. This "do it because we have to" rationale, however, is too simplistic: faculty who participate in OA simply out of fear of punishment, rather than for the invaluable insights OA can afford, are less likely to have high morale or engagement. It is true that OA is required by external accreditors, but it is not true that the work should be done only to suit their needs. OA is a tool with many uses and should be approached as such.

What is My Role?

Full-time faculty role
The OAC defined course and program-level outcomes assessment activities for full-time faculty consist of the following:

Participate in at least one program-level outcomes assessment project for the year

Implement at least one action to improve student learning as suggested by assessment project results

Identify course-level outcomes that align with program-level outcomes, where applicable

Revise course- and program-level outcomes, as needed, to ensure that all outcomes are current and assessable

Participate in the development or revision of a comprehensive plan to assess all applicable program-level outcomes

Part-time faculty role
COD encourages and invites adjunct faculty to participate in OA. Since the majority of faculty at COD are adjunct, and since part-time faculty often have OA experience at other institutions, their insights about student learning are especially valuable. Programs rely to varying degrees on adjunct faculty, and the more a program relies on part-time faculty, the more adjuncts should be encouraged to take part in outcomes assessment. We recommended that the full-time faculty detail explain the protocols for assessment plans as well as emphasize the importance of participating in OA for program improvement.

What Outcomes Assessment Resources are Available?

SLO Coordinators
COD has two faculty members here to support your assessment activities. Think of them as your course and program outcomes and assessment consultants and technical experts. The SLO Coordinators offer an array of outcomes and assessment workshops throughout the academic year. They are also available by appointment for individual course and program consultation; they can provide advice on how to write better outcomes, assess your courses and programs, what to assess, and how to act on the assessment results.

Your SLO Coordinators are:

Sarah Fry
sfry@collegeofthedesert.edu

Corbyn Voyu
cvoyu@collegeofthedesert.edu

Office of Institutional Effectiveness and Planning
The Office of Institutional Effectiveness and Planning is home to COD's Institutional Research (IR) services. Institutional Researchers are available to support your assessment projects by helping with the practicalities of research, such as:

Developing your assessment question(s)

Developing or selecting a valid, reliable assessment instrument

Choosing a sampling method and identifying your sample

Managing your assessment data, including confidentiality issues

Performing data analysis, including statistical tests

Linking assessment data to other data, such as student demographics, placement test scores, transcript data, etc.

Outcomes and Assessment Committee
The primary responsibility of OAC is to oversee and coordinate the development of all levels of student learning outcomes and assessment plans.

How Do I Do Outcomes Assessment? What's the Process?

Nine principles of good assessment practice
The American Association for Higher Education (AAHE) has published nine key considerations to bear in mind before engaging in the work of outcomes assessment. We highly recommend that you familiarize yourself with all of these prior to engaging in OA work, in order to ensure that your experience will be as productive and rewarding as possible.

Creating a plan: how do we choose what to assess?

It's important to remember that faculty retain the authority to direct OA work. Often, when just starting out, the best way to begin is with a complaint: what are you and your fellow faculty least satisfied with when it comes to student learning? Informal conversations (gripe sessions) around the departmental water cooler are a good way to discover your most pressing problem with student learning.

Once faculty have a sense of what aspect of student learning is most pressing, the second question to answer is: what outcome(s) would best provide us a picture of the student learning that we want to enhance? The key to any successful OA project is to keep the outcome(s) clearly in mind. Not only does an outcome clarify the learning in question, the language of the outcome will direct the work of the project itself.

The assessment cycle

The assessment cycle is a continuous process, and consists of the following steps:

Identify question(s) about student learning and gather data
Analyze and interpret data
Reflect with colleagues and plan for the future
Implement planned actions
Repeat the cycle

What kind of assessment tool can I use?

An assessment tool is an assignment completed by students that reflects their learning in a course or program. Faculty have a wide variety of assessment tools to choose from: exams, essays, performances, surveys, interviews, portfolios, quizzes—the list goes on. Any tool that can highlight how well students are meeting stated learning outcomes is appropriate. It's crucial that an OA project, though, be able to clearly address the learning outcomes in question. For example, a compelling essay prompt that is not in some way related to a learning outcome may not be useful for your project.

How do I choose an instrument?

An assessment instrument is used to assess how well a student has demonstrated evidence of learning. This can range in complexity from an answer key on a multiple choice test to an essay or performance rubric. The tool you choose will ultimately direct you to the best instrument to assess your results.

It's important to note, however, that those instruments that may involve subjective interpretation on the part of faculty —a rubric, for example – should be applied as consistently as possible.

How do I choose a sample?

When assessing a group of students, it's important that your results be valid. That is, the results should give you a reliable foundation upon which to base your conclusions about student learning. For that reason, it's ideal that you choose a representative sample of students to assess from a group. That number depends upon the total number of students in your sample size (whether that be a single class, series of classes, or a still larger sample).

How should I conduct the assessment?

Assessments can be embedded (given to students to complete as part of their graded requirements) or external (given to students separately from their graded requirements). When conducting the assessment, bear in mind these considerations:

Logistics: How many classes are you assessing? What will be necessary to ensure that the students complete the assessment? Who will administer the assessment? Who will collect the assessment?

Validity: How seriously will the students take the assessment? How will both students and instructor perceive the assessment?

Often, administering the assessment involves a series of decisions, dependent on your sample size, resources, needs, and other project variables.

What will the results tell me?

The results of a successful OA project will present valid data about how well students are meeting stated learning outcomes. They should sponsor a meaningful conversation among faculty as to what steps should be taken in future to enhance student learning relative to the outcome(s) in question.

What is the timeline?

A common timeline for an OA project is to Plan in Fall, Assess in Winter, Reflect in Spring. This approach ensures that a project is broken up into manageable parts which can be completed over the course of an academic year. However, this is not the only timeline faculty may choose for their project. As always, your resources and needs should play a part in the project timeline.

Keep in mind, for example, that faculty energy and participation can vary. Enthusiasm tends to be highest in Fall, whereas in Spring many faculty are distracted with year-end responsibilities. As well, you may wish to conduct multiple OA projects throughout the year. Like precious snowflakes, or precocious students, no two OA projects are alike. Your goals and resources should dictate your timeline.

Applying results to practice

"Closing the loop" is the catchphrase used to refer to the last step in an OA project. This step addresses the following question: Based on the results of the assessment, what changes are planned?

Applying results to practice is absolutely vital to a sustainable approach to OA. Not only does it satisfy explicit accreditation requirements, but implementing planned changes demonstrates for faculty how OA can impact their practice. Reflections on OA data must be more than conceptual, they should result in action—as collectively determined by the faculty involved in the project. That action is where the rubber meets the road (to employ another metaphor) when it comes to enhancing student learning.

Do my outcomes assessment results play a role in decision-making?

Closing the loop should mean more than just changes to faculty practice. The OA "loop" can—and should—be closed on an institutional scale. Administrative decisions that impact student learning have, in OA, a clear and common baseline in their impact on student learning. As OA serves many uses and multiple audiences, its incorporation into college-wide decisions will be made explicit for other stakeholders as well.

What is the role of outcomes assessment in curriculum?

OA plays a role in curriculum development at every level:

Program design – Program outcomes identify the broader learning goals for students upon completion of a course of study. In addition, they govern the distribution areas of those programs by providing a framework of learning within which required courses should fit. The courses required for a program should explicitly relate to the student learning stated in the program outcomes. For this reason, OA is central in determining the designation of courses with regard to program requirements and related distribution areas.

Course design – By articulating the goals for student learning in the form of course outcomes, OA provides faculty an opportunity to begin with the end in mind. More commonly known as "backward design" (link?), course outcomes allow faculty to structure students' experience in ways that lead them to mastery of stated learning goals. Rather than just being "about" the course topic, outcomes lead faculty to consider specifically what students will know or be able to do upon successfully completing the class.

Lesson design – It is important to note that OA should never infringe upon academic freedom. At the same time, outcomes provide a helpful focus in aligning classroom activities with stated learning goals. While stated learning outcomes need not encompass the totality of a student's experience in a class, at the same time they can provide faculty members with key guideposts for planning – and assessing – individual lessons.