

Defining Student Learning Outcomes

Step One: define your program goals.

What do you want your students to be able to do when they graduate? What hopes and aspirations to program faculty have for program graduates three to five years after graduation?

Some examples are:

- further academic study (graduate / professional schools)
- employed in field of study
- professional licensure / certification
- contribution to scholarship in the discipline (research, publication, teaching)

We use program goals to help frame our thoughts about the expectations we have for students. These will help as we begin writing student learning outcomes in the next step. For most programs, faculty will have more than one goal for their program graduates. There may be many possible educational or career paths that graduates will follow. It is not necessary to account for all of these variations. The purpose of this exercise is to help you start thinking about the outcomes you will soon develop.

The Assessment Handbook from Arizona State University uses the model of a fictitious program, a Bachelor of Science in Justice and Police Studies, BS JPS.

Program Goals for the BS JPS program:

There are several goals that we could identify for graduates of our BS JPS program. Some examples are shown below:

- We want our graduates to be employed as effective and ethical law enforcement officers or administrators.
- We want our graduates to be admitted to graduate school or law school.
- We want our graduates to work in government or not-for-profit agencies that serve the criminal justice profession.

Exercise 1: use the space below to list two or three program goals for your program.

Do the goals above support the program mission statement? Compare the goals to your program mission statement and underline those elements that are supported by the program goals above. If the goals you wrote do not support the program mission statement, take a moment to revise your program goals.

Choose one program goal from the list above that you will use for this exercise. You and your colleagues may decide to use the other program goals as you develop your full assessment plan. You may also decide to revise the list or add other program goals not listed above.

Our program goal for the BS JPS program is: “We want our graduates to be employed as effective and ethical law enforcement officers or administrators.”

Exercise 2:

Use this space to list one program goal

Writing Student Learning Outcomes Based on Program Goals

Program outcomes are the intended learning outcomes of an academic program. They are the answers to the question, “What should program graduates know and be able to do?” Another way to think of program outcomes is the set of knowledge and skills program graduates will need if they are to achieve the long term goals you have for them.

Examples of knowledge and skill areas are shown in the table below. You might identify others that are appropriate for your academic discipline.

Knowledge	Skills
Content knowledge Theory	Problem solving Research methods Critical thinking Oral/ written communication Application of theory/knowledge Analysis Leadership Team participation Ethics Design skills

Program faculty should identify **at least three, and not more than seven**, program outcomes.

For today’s exercise, we will develop a single program outcome in support of the long term goal you identified for your program.

There are several important guidelines to consider when writing program outcomes.

1. *Flow directly from, and support, the program mission.* Think about the program mission statement. The connection to that mission (and the mission of the college) should be evident in your program outcomes.
2. *Relate directly to the academic discipline and reflect the knowledge and skills students should acquire.* It can be tempting to write program outcomes that are based on knowledge or skills that are important, but may not be attributable to the curricular content of the program. It is very common to see program outcomes that emphasize writing or critical thinking. Everyone would agree that these are important skills, but students ordinarily acquire those skills across an undergraduate curriculum as general education outcomes. Are they directly attributable to learning acquired in your program? You may consider writing or critical thinking to be very important for graduates of your program. If so, think about how you expects student to demonstrate those skills within the context of your academic discipline.

Consider the example below.

Weak	Better
Graduates of the BS JPS program will be critical thinkers.	Graduates of the BS JPS program will be able to analyze a current issue in criminal justice.

3. *Must be observable and measurable.* Focus on observable behaviors rather than what students know, think, understand, appreciate, etc. We cannot measure what students know or understand, but we can measure how well they demonstrate evidence of knowledge or understanding. Avoid outcome statements that say, “Students will know ...” or “Students will understand ...” When you are tempted to use these, think about what students who *know* and *understand* will be able to *do* with that knowledge or understanding.

Consider the example below.

Weak	Better
Graduates of the BS JPS program will understand the 4th Amendment to the Constitution.	Graduates of the BS JPS program will be able to analyze a current search and seizure issue.

4. *Focus on knowledge and skills graduates should possess rather than curriculum design, department resources, faculty characteristics, or instructional methods.* Rather than saying that students will learn, students will increase understanding, students will acquire knowledge, etc., express outcomes in terms of what students will be able to do.

Consider the example below.

Input focused	Outcome focused
Faculty will improve their content knowledge through participation in professional development activities. OR Department labs will be equipped with	Graduates of the Art History program will analyze the religious and political influences on 18th century European artists.

state-of-the-art instruments.	
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5. Write program outcomes that do not combine multiple outcomes in a single statement. Avoid the temptation to bundle everything you value about your program into a lengthy outcome statement. Stay focused on clear and simple outcomes that will yield high quality information. When evaluating your outcome statements, be careful not to lump multiple elements into a single statement.

Consider the example below.

Multiple outcomes (5)	Single outcome (1)
Graduates of the psychology programs will be lifelong learners who understand the concepts of psychology and can apply those concepts to design and conduct research studies .	Graduates of the psychology program will be able to design a research study .

One of the best ways to resolve problems with an outcome statement that consists of multiple outcomes is to collapse them into a single outcome. A very common example is an outcome that refers to program graduates’ ability to “design and conduct research studies, and communicate the results of their research both orally and in writing.” This is easily resolved by saying that program graduates will be able to conduct research. Through the use of a structured rubric, program faculty can separately evaluate students’ ability to design a study, collect data, analyze data, interpret results, write research reports, and communicate their findings to others. Such a rubric will permit faculty to give feedback (and grades) for each of the separate components, and then arrive at an overall grade for the project.

6. Write outcome statements that are short and concise. Longer statements tend to be vague or include multiple outcomes.

7. Write your outcome statements in the form of “Graduates of the _____ program will be able to _____;” or “Graduates of the _____ program will be prepared to _____.” This format will help you avoid many of the problems described in the preceding paragraphs.

Drafting a student learning outcome

Draft a student learning outcome that identifies the knowledge or skills program graduates should possess. Evaluate the draft using the six guidelines, and revise until all seven guidelines have been met.

Draft student learning outcome:

<i>BS JPS graduates who enter the law enforcement profession will have high clearance rates for their investigations.</i>	
<p>Are the guidelines met? Support program mission.</p> <p>Directly related to discipline</p> <p>Observable and measurable</p> <p>Focused on outcomes rather than inputs</p> <p>Avoid combining multiple outcomes Short and concise Graduates will be able to _____</p>	<p><input type="checkbox"/> High clearance rates are important to any law enforcement agency, but unrelated to the BS JPS program mission. <i>Remember to base each program outcome on a long term goal to ensure consistency with program mission.</i></p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> The BS JPS program trains its students in criminal justice administration, not investigative techniques.</p> <p>✓ Crime statistics are readily available through a number of public sources.</p> <p>✓ Solving crimes and closing cases is an outcome rather than a curricular input.</p> <p>✓ This is a single outcome.</p> <p>✓ This outcome is short and concise.</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> This outcome does not state a specific skill or ability.</p>

Exercise 3: Write the first draft of a student learning outcome for your program Write your outcome statement in the left-hand box below. Next, check the boxes for guidelines that you outcome meets.

<p>Student Learning Outcome:</p>	<p>Are the guidelines met?</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Support program mission.</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Directly related to discipline</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Observable and measurable</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Focused on outcomes rather than inputs</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Avoid combining multiple outcomes</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Short and concise</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Graduates will be able to _____</p>
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Further clarifying examples:

<i>BS JPS graduates will be able to apply knowledge of social, behavioral, and constitutional issues to develop well-written policies that are legally defensible and socially acceptable to key stakeholders.</i>	
<p>Are the guidelines met? Support program mission.</p> <p>Directly related to discipline</p> <p>Observable and measurable</p> <p>Focused on outcomes rather than inputs</p> <p>Avoid combining multiple outcomes</p> <p>Short and concise</p> <p>Graduates will be able to _____</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ This outcome is directly related to our long-term goal, so we know that it supports the program mission. ✓ This outcome is directly related to the BS JPS program. ✓ There are many ways in which faculty can ask students to demonstrate their constitutional knowledge and policy-writing skills. Give examples here ... ✓ Demonstration of content knowledge and skills is outcome focused. <input type="checkbox"/> There are multiple outcomes combined in a single statement <input type="checkbox"/> This is somewhat wordy – a red flag for multiple outcomes. ✓ This is in the correct form.

Final draft:

BS JPS graduates will be able to write appropriate enforcement policies.	
<p>Are the guidelines met? Support program mission.</p> <p>Directly related to discipline</p> <p>Observable and measurable</p> <p>Focused on outcomes rather than inputs</p> <p>Avoid combining multiple outcomes</p> <p>Short and concise</p> <p>Graduates will be able to _____</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ This outcome is directly related to our long-term goal, so we know that it supports the program mission. ✓ This outcome is directly related to the BS JPS program. ✓ There are many ways in which faculty can ask students to demonstrate their constitutional knowledge and policy-writing skills ✓ Demonstration of content knowledge and skills is outcome focused. ✓ This is a single outcome ✓ This is short and concise ✓ This is in the correct form.

Exercise 4: **Write the second (or third) draft of your student learning outcome.** Continue to revise until all guidelines are met.

Student Learning Outcome:	Are the guidelines met? <input type="checkbox"/> Support program mission. <input type="checkbox"/> Directly related to discipline <input type="checkbox"/> Observable and measurable <input type="checkbox"/> Focused on outcomes rather than inputs <input type="checkbox"/> Avoid combining multiple outcomes <input type="checkbox"/> Short and concise <input type="checkbox"/> Graduates will be able to _____
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Student Learning Outcome:	Are the guidelines met? <input type="checkbox"/> Support program mission. <input type="checkbox"/> Directly related to discipline <input type="checkbox"/> Observable and measurable <input type="checkbox"/> Focused on outcomes rather than inputs <input type="checkbox"/> Avoid combining multiple outcomes <input type="checkbox"/> Short and concise <input type="checkbox"/> Graduates will be able to _____
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Write the final version of your student learning outcome here:
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Adapted from: *The Assessment Handbook*, Arizona State University, pp. 19-22 and from the online version http://www.asu.edu/oue/docs/AssessmentPlanningWorkbook_July10.pdf, pp. 9-17. Used with permission.