Student Learning Outcomes Assessment
Student-Learning Outcomes Assessment

The University of Hartford is committed to assessing student-learning outcomes at three levels: institutional, program, and course. Our primary focus in this document is on program-level assessment. All academic programs are expected to have assessment plans in which they identify program-level student-learning outcomes, methods for assessing those outcomes, criteria for rating students' performance on the assessments, and a schedule for assessing the outcomes. All academic programs are to report annually in Trac Dat the specific results of the assessments, an analysis of the findings, and a plan for action, based on the findings, for the upcoming year.

The aim of this document is to build a common understanding of and shared language for the student-learning outcome assessment process at the University of Hartford.
The University’s assessment process includes defining student-learning outcomes, facilitating the learning, assessing the outcomes of the learning, and using the results to improve teaching and learning at the individual, course, program, and institutional levels. A coherent university-wide system allows us to clearly report our students’ achievements to our stakeholders (e.g., students, employers, Board of Regents, accreditation agencies).

Defining Student Learning Outcomes
In the literatures, words such as goals, objectives, and outcomes are used, often interchangeably, to convey what we hope to accomplish through teaching and learning interactions. To build a shared understanding of the assessment process at the University of Hartford and enhance our efforts, a single term “outcomes” is used.
**Student-learning outcomes** are written as **measurable results-oriented statements** that specify to students and others the knowledge, attitudes, or skills we want students to demonstrate upon completion of an educational experience. They provide a foundation for obtaining valid and reliable data that can be used to improve curriculum, instruction, and student learning. There is no ideal number of student learning outcomes for a course or a program. You want to strike a balance between covering key competencies (knowledge, skills, and attitudes) and selecting a number that you can reasonably manage. Often, programs write a long list of learning outcomes to begin, and that’s fine. Then, as they move forward to consider how to assess these outcomes, the list becomes smaller. That does not mean the outcomes that have been removed are not important; it means a focus on what is truly essential.

**Well-Written Student Learning Outcomes**

- Use clear, direct language that helps students and others understand the knowledge, attitudes, or skills we expect students to attain through their studies.
- Describe a measurable and an observable behavior.
- Have the student as the doer of the action.

**Common Problems with Student Learning Outcomes**

- The student-learning outcome is not observable as written (e.g., understanding or appreciation cannot be observed).
- The student-learning outcome is too broad to be measured.
- There are too many or too few student-learning outcomes.

**Program-Level Student-Learning Outcomes**

Program student-learning outcomes are measurable results-oriented statements that specify what students will be able to know and be able to do as a result of participating in an academic degree program. These outcomes are described in each program's academic learning assessment plans, recorded in TracDat, and featured on the department or program website.

**Examples of Program Student-Learning Outcomes**

- Students should be able to analyze historical literature and present clearly and coherently articulated arguments on historical subjects.
- Students should be able to create at least 12 original works in their medium.
Assessing Student-Learning Outcomes
To identify if students are learning what we intended them to learn, we must identify varied methods, or tasks, to assess change, growth, and the integration of knowledge, attitudes, or skills over time. We also need to create rubrics, scoring guides, or scales to rate students’ performances on the assessment methods.

Assessment Methods
Direct summative assessment methods are most often used to measure student-learning outcomes at the program-level (e.g., portfolios, performances, thesis, comprehensive exams, licensure or certification exams) and course-level (e.g., research papers, course exams, case studies, oral presentations).

At any level, the assessment method should:
- Be meaningfully related to the student-learning outcome you are trying to assess.
- Require that students' display in observable ways the knowledge, skills, or attitudes described in the student-learning outcome.

Example of a Program-Level Method for Assessing Student-Learning Outcomes

Students give an oral presentation in which they demonstrate their mastery of key program content through a critical analysis of and a viable solution for a problem posed in case study materials.

Students produce a portfolio containing specific artifacts evidencing students' accomplishment of each of the learning outcome. Faculty members use a structure, process, and rubric, scoring guide, or rating scale for assessing the portfolios. The individual artifacts in the portfolio are assessed in relation to specific student-learning outcomes.

Rating Students Performances on Assessment Methods
Generally speaking, rubrics are the best choice for rating performance. The rubric contains essential criteria for the task and levels of performance (e.g., from poor to excellent) for each criterion. Rubrics can take a variety of forms and levels of complexity, but they all:
- Focus on measuring a specific outcome
- Use a range to rate performance
- Contain specific performance characteristics arranged in levels indicating the degree to which a standard has been met

Basic Steps for Creating a Rubric

1. Identify the student-learning outcome.
2. Define your assessment method (e.g., paper, experiment, performance). This is “what” you are asking your students to do.
3. Identify the standard or criteria by which you will rate students’ work.
   Determine the various abilities that students should display to demonstrate achievement of the learning outcome(s). These abilities are your criteria or standards. Each criterion should be expressed in a simple phrase or brief statement, which is measurable through the examination of students’ products or performances.

4. Identify possible levels of achievement.
   Given the expectations of what students are to be able to demonstrate, write descriptions of the possible levels of achievement (e.g., Unacceptable, Developing, Adequate, Target). Note; sometimes in the development of a rubric a program will stop here and simply have the raters identify one category. That is a good interim step to developing a robust rubric.

5. Create descriptions for the criteria along each level of achievement.
   Write brief a simple phrase or brief statement that described the standard or criteria for high quality work (e.g., Target) and successively lesser quality work.

**Frequency of Assessment**

In general, essential learning outcomes should be assessed more than once, both in a course and a program. This practice affords students more frequent feedback and opportunities for improvement, and allows faculty to track improvement over time, rather than see an unsatisfactory performance when it is too late to do anything about it. At the program level, multiple assessments reinforce the importance of the outcome as something attached to a program, not just a course. Please note that the product assessed and the rating method (see below) do not need to be the same each time an outcome is assessed.

**Integrative Assessment**

At the program level in particular, the desired overall outcome for students is not just the mastery of individual components but the ability to put the pieces together in an integrated whole. Students should have at least one opportunity to demonstrate such integration in an assessment that measures more than one of the program outcomes.

**Improving Student Learning (Closing the Loop)**

The whole point of any assessment system is to improve student learning. Students receive individual feedback on their performance on courses, tests, assignments, and so on, but faculty and program coordinators need aggregate information on how well groups of students are or are not acquiring the desired learning outcomes, so that they can consider adjustments in the course and/or the program.

**Closing the Loop at the Program Level**

Each year, programs should be sure that data on student performance on each of the key assessments is recorded and stored in TracDat. Program faculty should meet each year to discuss the results. Based on those discussions, the faculty may recommend making
changes to courses, assignments, assessment methods, rubrics, or even outcomes. Those changes should also be recorded in TracDat.

Provided that the outcomes, assessments, rating system, results, and recommended actions are stored in TracDat, an annual report can easily be generated by the program director, the department chair, the dean, or the Office of the Provost. In the Office of the Provost, those reports will be used to provide feedback to programs on the strengths and weaknesses of their assessment system, and to look for patterns that might indicate the need for further support and training.