



Assessment Revisited: A Guide to De-Cluttering the Assessment Process



Program Assessment

The practice of defining and assessing learning outcomes is a tool that allows educators to ask meaningful questions about the learning that takes place in their programs, and make intentional choices about how to develop and improve that learning over time. Assessment that promotes and supports quality teaching and learning involves defining priorities, setting goals, describing actions of learners, and developing a plan to improve learning through informed decision making.

Critical Definitions for Program Assessment

A **Mission Statement** defines what an organization is, its reason for being. It communicates to all parties the reason the program exists. At NMSU, program missions should be linked to the university’s land-grant mission, (see Example, pg.) but should not necessarily be a restatement of the land grant mission.

Goals describe what your program strives to accomplish. More specific than the mission statement, goals are still broad statements that not only communicate a direction for the program, but also provide a basis for recognizing accomplishments and successes. Articulated goals help motivate faculty and staff to pursue the program’s purpose. Goals should relate to the mission, and are the ends toward which efforts are directed. In short, goals exist to define and provide direction for the program.

Objectives describe the intended results, effects, or consequences that will occur when a learner successfully completes a program or activity. Objectives focus on the intended behavior of the learner. In essence, they state *who*, will be able to do *what (action verb)*. Ex: Graduates of the English program will be able to critically analyze a classic piece of literature.

IN A NUTSHELL

Mission: the program’s reason for being

Goals: what the program strives to do; how the mission manifests itself

Objectives: what program completers will be able to do

“Why Assess?”

Plans and actions based on clear goals and objectives are more likely to succeed. Articulating goals and objectives refocuses energy and efforts toward the main objective or purpose you wish to accomplish. Ultimately, incorporating assessment of the degree to which you are achieving these goals and objectives simply helps keep focus on desired outcomes, negates distraction by all of the ‘other things’ that come into play along the way, and ensures continuous, intentional improvements in teaching & learning.

Notice the contextual shift when moving from Goals to Objectives:

Goals are statements about the *program* (what it strives to do);

Objectives are statements about the *learner* (what the learner will *be able to do*).

Effective
teaching &
learning is
facilitated
by
meaningful
assessment

“So what is an *OUTCOME*, and where does it fit in?”

Outcomes provide **evidence** that objectives have been accomplished. They state the specific activity or behavior a learner will display, the level to which they will perform, and the time frame in which this occurs. Outcomes provide evidence of the program’s success in achieving its goals. In short, outcomes indicate *how* the program provides evidence that the learner has acquired the ability to perform in the way the program intended. If discrepancies between the *desired* outcomes and the *performed* outcomes exist, the program will reflect on what it can do differently to increase the likelihood of bringing about the desired outcomes.

TYPES OF OUTCOMES

There are three types of outcomes, each of which provides a different kind of information that may be used to initiate changes to a program.

1. **Operational Outcomes** tell about ‘operations’. For example, how many chairs are in the classroom; how many students fill those chairs each day; what resources are available, who’s using them, and when; and what survey distribution has the best response. Operational outcomes provide important information, but don’t tell us much about what a learner has *learned* as a result of being on our campus, attending our classes, or participating in our programs.
2. **Indirect Learning Outcomes** tell one of three things:
 - What students, faculty or employers *believe* learners have learned as a result of completing a program;
 - How satisfied learners are with their experience in a program, or;
 - What learners have achieved.

The first kind of indirect learning outcome often involves self-reporting by the learner on the desired outcome. Students are asked to *reflect* on their learning rather than demonstrate it. Sometimes faculty members are asked to reflect on their students learning, as a source of data. Examples include exit surveys, student interviews, alumni surveys, faculty questionnaire, and employer satisfaction surveys.

THE RUBBER MEETS THE ROAD

Outcomes provide programs with *information* to determine:

- 1) Are the things the program is doing, in the way it is doing them, bringing about the intended results?
- 2) Is there a better way?

The second kind of indirect learning outcome comes from similar sources. A typical question might be “How satisfied were you with your course experience in the English program, while attending NMSU?”

The third kind of indirect learning outcome focuses on the achievements of students, including graduation rates, GPA, job placement, assisted publications, and continuing education placement.

“What’s so special about DIRECT Student Learning

Several types of outcomes exist, and all can be of value. To base decisions on hard evidence, we need the *right* evidence. If we need to know how many books are in the library, we don’t ask students to list the books they’ve checked out this semester – we count the books in the library! Likewise, if we need to know, (in no uncertain terms), what our students *really* learned, this semester, we don’t ask them to *tell us* what they’ve learned, we ask them to *show us* what they’ve learned: We need hard evidence to warrant time and expense for new initiatives.

TYPES OF OUTCOMES CONT’D.

All three types of indirect learning outcomes provide valuable information on what the learner *perceives* regarding the value of his/her participation and his/her persistence in completing a program or degree. Still, these learning outcomes *do not* include any *direct evidence* of the learner’s performance on specific tasks which completion of the program was intended to bring about.

3. **Direct Learning Outcomes** identify and measure observable behaviors or actions by the learner and demonstrate that the intended learning objective has occurred. When using direct outcomes, learners demonstrate knowledge and skills by *directly* responding to stimuli. Examples include objective tests, essays, presentations, lab experiments, artistic performance, special projects, and classroom assignments. The learner’s behavior is *directly* connected to the assessment measure – they don’t say what they know, *they show what they know!*

“Why can’t we just use grades?”

This is probably the most frequently asked question about assessment. The problem is that course grades are generally arrived at from an accumulation of a variety of measures of student learning, (as well as some other criteria), and do not focus on specific outcomes.

Most course grades result from a series of assignments, quizzes and exams. Each may be equally weighted, or not. Different instructors of the same course may have different assignments, different grading scales, or different weights for assignments. Additionally, any of a number of factors such as attendance, extra-credit, dropped scores, or participation, may also be used to determine a student’s grade.

Finally, different teachers place different value on specific content within their fields of expertise. These differences reflect individual faculty expertise and variations in teaching style, strengths and values, and are vital to faculty autonomy. However, we are obligated to ensure that learners who complete our program acquire a core of skills that are essential to the profession. Consequently, although teachers may present content according to their individual ideologies and philosophy and in response to specific pedagogical contexts, core skills must still be learned in particular courses and programs. Assessment involves identification of those skills and/or behaviors, where those skills/behaviors are expected to be learned, and measurement of the degree to which learners acquire those skills/behaviors . Specific outcomes can be assessed across several sections of the same course, ensuring that all learners are given the opportunity to develop and master crucial behaviors and/or skills.

DIRECT STUDENT LEARNING OUTCOMES (SLOs) ARE OBSERVABLE BEHAVIORS OR ACTIONS ON THE PART OF THE LEARNER THAT DEMONSTRATE THE INTENDED LEARNING OBJECTIVE HAS BEEN ACHIEVED.

The BOTTOM LINE

Identifying and assessing outcomes keeps us focused on the critical components of students' experiences as they progress through our programs. When we articulate agreed-upon outcomes for student learning, we are also agreeing on what the driving force of our teaching will be. We begin to work collectively – partnering across courses, and even across departments and colleges – to ensure the best scenario for helping our students achieve the outcomes *we have determined* are most important. Articulating learning outcomes keeps us in the driver's seat, keeps us focused on what we want to accomplish, and eliminates distractions that keep us from arriving at our goals. Assessment is simply a tool that helps ensure our program curricula are directed, intentional, and effective.

PUTTING IT ALL TOGETHER

Following is an example of how one might develop institutional program assessment from NMSU's Land Grant Mission. This document models the process by which a department/program could establish goals, objectives, and outcomes. Although in this example several goals are listed (5-6 should be the maximum for any program), only one *direct learning* outcome is identified. This is one of any number of outcomes that could be identified – it is just the one chosen to illustrate the three types of outcomes described earlier: operational, indirect, and direct. Operational and indirect learning outcomes are given to illustrate a comparison/contrast to *direct* learning outcomes. The intent is that this will make it more clear what exactly a *direct* learning outcome entails.

“Data, schmata... where's my INFORMATION?”

In today's world, we all have *too much data...* and not enough information. For data to be useful, it must provide *meaningful and appropriate* information.

Assessment is about transforming data into information. Information is what leads to “informed” decision making, and consequently intentional teaching and learning.

Data gets
stored,
information
gets used.

Assessment brings unity to diverse methods of teaching, while simultaneously preserving the principals of academic autonomy.



NMSU Mission: NMSU is the state's land-grant university, serving the educational needs of New Mexico's diverse population through comprehensive programs of education, research, extension education, and public service.

EXAMPLE

Program: Facilitation of Assessment

Mission: To promote, facilitate and communicate a positive culture and unrelenting institutional commitment to evidence-based teaching and learning that transcends discipline and area divisions. *The program Mission aligns with NMSU's mission, 'to serve educational needs.'*

Goals:

We are here to...

1. ...educate, train, direct and assist faculty and staff in effective and efficient assessment of student learning in meaningful and valuable ways that contribute to continuous and intentional improvement in student learning and retention.

The Goal aligns with the concepts of 'promote, facilitate' and 'teaching and learning', as stated in the Mission.

2. ...coordinate assessment endeavors campus wide.

The Goal aligns with the statement 'transcends discipline and area divisions.'

3. ...ensure institutional policies and procedures promote and protect assessment initiatives.

The Goal aligns with 'facilitate and communicate a positive culture', and 'institutional commitment.'

4. ...promote publicity and awareness of teaching and learning initiatives both internally and externally.

The Goal aligns with the concepts of 'promote' and 'communicate', as stated in the mission.

5. ...remain abreast of developments and trends in assessing student learning and program effectiveness.

The Goal aligns with the concept of 'promote, facilitate', as stated in the mission.

All program goals support the stated mission, address the many aspects of the mission, and articulate how the organization intends to fulfill the mission.

Objectives:

Faculty, staff and students at NMSU will...

1. ...improve teaching & learning through assessment.
2. ...participate in integrated assessment endeavors across campus.
3. ...uninhibitedly and wholeheartedly participate in assessment processes.
4. ...be able to describe teaching and learning initiatives on campus.
5. ...employ current assessment practices.

Objectives simply restate the goals in ways that describe the anticipated behavior of the learners. The 'learners' in this example include faculty, staff and students.





Outcome:

One general goal, “Faculty will undergo training each year,” has been identified to be articulated as an outcome. This is only one of many possibilities.

“Faculty will undergo training each year,” is presented below as an operational outcome, as an indirect learning outcome, and as a direct learning outcome. These examples are intended to facilitate a better understanding of the distinction between operational, indirect learning, and direct learning outcomes.

The outcomes stated below align with Goal 1: “We are here to educate, train, direct and assist faculty and staff in effective and efficient assessment of student learning in meaningful and valuable ways that contribute to continuous and intentional improvement in student learning and retention.”

Operational Outcome:

Faculty will undergo training: Each year, 32 faculty will undergo extensive training and development in assessment awareness and usefulness in their own classrooms.

This is a ‘bean counter’ type of measure because it tells how many, what will be done, and how often. The focus is on what the program wants to happen, not what the learner will be able to do as a result of participation. Achieving the outcome does not guarantee that anything of substance is taking place, simply that the wheels are in motion.

Indirect Learning Outcome:

Faculty will undergo training: Eighty percent of faculty who have undergone developmental training will rank their training experience as ‘Good’ or ‘Exceptional.’

This is an ‘opinion/perception’ type of measure – it gives definitive numbers or scores and relates to the goal, but the focus is still on what the program wants to happen, not on evidence of the learners ability to perform as a result of participation. In addition, this amounts to ‘feel good’ reporting and, even though learners may be quite satisfied with the training, this measure does not provide evidence that the training resulted in relevant behavior changes.

Direct Learning Outcome:

Faculty will undergo training: Of the 32 faculty who underwent training and development, 90 percent will carry out an assessment of at least one outcome in their class, document it, use the information to determine if they are achieving the desired outcomes, and implement strategies to develop and improve learning on that outcome as needed.

This outcome relates more directly to the stated objective than the stated goal. This is a ‘the proof is in the pudding’ type of measure because the learner produces something that is then evaluated by a second party. The outcomes is measured through action rather than simply indicating degree of participation or satisfaction.