Frequently Asked Questions about Assessment of Student Learning

The questions in this document were asked by UNC faculty members and academic programs. For clarifications or to ask additional questions, contact Julie Sexton at Julie.sexton@unco.edu, 970-351-2196.

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MISSION STATEMENT

Q: How much overall latitude is there in mission statements for higher education programs?

A: Each academic program is encouraged to develop a mission statement rooted in the disciplinary context for that program. For example, a mission statement for biology may be different from a mission statement for English because there may be different disciplinary values, goals, and curricula. Although mission statements will be unique and based on the values, goals, and curricula for a program, there are general guidelines for writing mission statements that all program are encouraged to follow. The following guidelines serve as a general guide for writing a mission statement.

Mission statements should
1. Be clear and concise
2. Reflect the values of the program
3. State the purpose of the program
4. Indicate the primary functions or activities of the program
5. Indicate who the stakeholders are
6. Support the mission of the college
7. Support the mission of UNC
8. Serve as a foundation for the program’s student learning outcomes
9. If the program has an external accreditation or some other entity that oversees the program, align with the expectations of the external accreditor or oversight entity

Q: Our department/school has several separate programs. Should we write one mission statement that serves as an umbrella for all of the programs or should we write a separate mission for each program?

A: The department/school should have an overarching mission. However, there isn't a specific rule or requirement about if each program should also have a separate mission. Each department/school will need to evaluate what works best within their unit. Here are some general suggestions that will help guide the discussion about how to structure a mission.

Individual programs under the department/school may or may not need an additional mission depending on how the separate programs are structured. For example, if the school/department offers only one undergraduate degree, but has multiple emphases within that degree then it might make sense that there is only one overarching mission. Or if the department/school has one undergraduate degree and a graduate degree then it still might make sense that there in only one overarching mission.

If the department/school offers several different undergraduate degrees and graduate degrees through multiple programs, then is may make sense to have one overarching mission to link the various degrees and separate missions for the separate degree programs.

Q: How broad or specific should we make our mission statement?
A: A mission should be specific enough so that the discipline of the department is obvious and should be specific enough so that it serves as a foundation for the department's student learning outcomes. The mission should also clearly distinguish the department from other departments. For example, it should be obvious when reading a mission statement from a history department that the mission statement is for a history department. However, the mission should be broad enough to allow for non-substantive modifications in the wording or focus of learning outcomes without having to modify the mission statement.

**STUDENT LEARNING OUTCOMES**

**Q: How many student learning outcomes should we develop for our program?**

A: Generally programs have 5-10 program student learning outcomes. However, there is no hard and fast rule about how many student learning outcomes you should develop. You want to develop enough learning outcomes to help you understand if students are leaving your program with the knowledge, skills, and dispositions that are important. But you don't want to develop so many student learning outcomes that it isn't practical for you to collect and analyze data for all of the outcomes.

**Q: How do we develop student learning outcomes in a program as broad and diverse as ours?**

A: Some programs may struggle in developing a set of student learning outcomes. There are several starting places where you can get information to help you start developing learning outcomes.

1. Your discipline’s professional organizations. Some professional organizations have developed recommended student learning outcomes.

2. Your discipline’s accreditation body. If your program/department is accredited, then you should check with your accreditation body. Some accreditation organizations have developed recommended student learning outcomes.

3. Other similar programs' outcomes. It is likely that similar programs at other universities have already developed a set of student learning outcomes. A good starting place is to review the outcomes developed by programs similar to yours at other colleges and universities.

**CURRICULUM MAP**

**Q: In our program's curriculum map, should we include courses that are not part of our program curriculum but that are critical for students to complete the degree?**

A: It is recommended that you start the curriculum map by including only those courses that are part of your program's curriculum. Over time, as you gain skills in conducting assessment then
you can add courses that are critical for students that are not part of your program curriculum. If
the courses are taught by other departments then you will need to work collaboratively with the
other departments to determine how those other courses fit into your curriculum and how you
can ensure that those courses provide students with the skills, knowledge, and dispositions that
you would like your students to get from those courses.

Q: In developing our curriculum map, we determined that all of the courses in our
program assess a particular student learning outcome. Does that mean they we should
gather assessment data from all of those courses?

A: It is probably not necessary for the program to collect data from all of the courses. Program-
level assessment focuses on the collection and analysis of data to determine the extent to which
students have achieved program-level student learning outcomes by the time the students leave
the program (this is typically called summative assessment). For summative assessment,
programs would identify the point in the curriculum that best represents students’ summative
knowledge, skills, and disposition related to a particular learning outcome. This is the best point
in the curriculum to collect data to assess student learning outcome. Sometimes this point is one
senior-level course; however, there may be two courses which represent the point in the
curriculum that best allows the program to collect data on students summative knowledge, skills,
and dispositions.

Sometimes programs may find it helpful to collect data as a student enters a program and at an
intermediate stage during a student’s journey through the program. When programs collect and
analyze data at the beginning or at an intermediate stage in a student's journey through a program
it is called formative assessment. The program will typically conduct formative assessment to
help them understand when and how students develop particular knowledge, skills, and
dispositions. Programs also conduct formative assessment to help them understand trends that
are observed in summative assessment results.

It is recommended that programs start by focusing on summative assessment data collection and
analysis. Formative assessment data collection and analysis can be added as needed, but is not
required on an ongoing basis.

Q: Our program has few required courses and many electives. Should all of the electives be
included in our curriculum map?

A: It is recommended that programs include elective courses if those courses are intended to help
students gain the knowledge, skills, and dispositions in the program's student learning outcomes.
If the courses are intended to help students achieve the program's student learning outcomes, but
the courses aren't included in the curriculum map analysis, then a program won't be able to
determine how those courses help students gain the necessary knowledge, skills, and
dispositions.

It is recommended that a program gradually add those electives to the curriculum mapping
process as the program develops its assessment skills. A program might first add the required
courses to the curriculum mapping process and develop a timeline to gradually add the electives to the curriculum mapping process.

**METHODS**

**Q: One of our student learning outcomes has multiple parts or components. It seems challenging to use only one method for a complex outcome. Are we supposed to select one method for the outcome?**

**A.** The first recommendation is to reevaluate your outcome. It is best to avoid outcomes with multiple parts or components. Outcomes become challenging to evaluate if they have multiple parts. Ideally, an outcome is simple and focused. However, there are instances when an outcome must be complex to capture the complexity of a particular program. These complex outcomes can be so interconnected that to separate the elements into separate outcomes would diminish the richness of the assessment. When evaluating your outcomes, be careful not to lump multiple elements into a single statement unless you truly have a complex outcome for a complex program.

If you have decided that it isn't possible to break apart your complex outcome into multiple outcomes then you will need to select a method that best captures the extent to which students have gained the skills, knowledge, and/or dispositions embedded in the outcome. Presumably, the method will have multiple components since the outcome has multiple components. The challenge is in analyzing the method data. One solution is to use a structured rubric to evaluate various components of the outcome. Such a rubric will allow faculty to give feedback (and grades) for each of the separate components, and then arrive at an overall score for the project.