

Where Do Course SLOs Live?

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The 2002 Accreditation Standards and Eligibility Requirements placed an increased emphasis on the assessment of student learning as a means of evaluating and improving the educational effectiveness of institutions. A few examples of standards that deal with learning outcomes are below:

Standard IB: Improving Institutional Effectiveness

The institution demonstrates a conscious effort to produce and support student learning, measures that learning, assesses how well learning is occurring, and makes changes to improve student learning.

Standard II A.1.c:

The institution identifies student learning outcomes for courses, programs, certificates, and degrees; assesses student achievement of those outcomes; and uses assessment results to make improvements.

Standard II.A.6:

In every class section students receive a course syllabus that specifies learning objectives consistent with those in the institution's officially approved course outline.

This article seeks to add some clarity to the dialogue between and among member institutions, particularly the faculty members, about what the Standards require. The interpretation and application of SLOs at the course level has generated four common questions:

- How do course SLOs relate to learning objectives?
- Must SLOs be consistent across all sections/classes of a course?
- Must SLOs appear in official institutional documents such as the official course outline or catalogue?
- Must SLOs appear in the faculty members' course syllabi?

In an ideal situation, intended student learning outcomes should be the foundation upon which a course is developed. Faculty first define the learning outcomes they expect successful students to achieve and demonstrate, and then from those intended outcomes, design the course. Pedagogy, learning environment, and learning support materials all follow from intended SLOs.

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Realistically, many course designs have been driven by other matters, including transfer institution requirements for general education, articulation agreements, course sequencing, and the notion of the canon of course objectives – what the course will “cover.” Vocational or technical courses may have begun with intended learning outcomes as the basis for design, but most institutions are really *adding* student learning outcomes onto existing academic courses. Nevertheless, a good course (and one that successfully addresses accreditation requirements) identifies the intended SLOs for the course, as well as the means of authentically assessing whether and how well students learn.

How do course SLOS relate to learning objectives? Most of the confusion about the difference between SLOs and learning objectives lies in the term “objectives.” Generally, objectives specify discrete steps taken within an educational program to achieve an outcome. They are the means, not the ends. So the “course” objectives specified by the California public college system’s Academic Senate, for example, are defined as follows: “Objectives are the key elements which must be taught each time the course is taught.”¹ Course SLOs are the intended learning outcomes; objectives are the things that must be taught/covered in order to achieve those learning outcomes. Sometimes, these things are very close; often, they are quite distinct.

Must SLOs be consistent across all sections/classes of a course? With SLOs defined in part as the foundation of a course, the ACCJC requirement is that each course has a single set of SLOs that are common to all sections/classes of the course, no matter who teaches the section or class (Standards II.A.6 and II.A.6.c.). This assures that all students will know what to expect as the potential outcomes of completing a course successfully. One might refer to that set of SLOs as “core” SLOs for the course. This also means each faculty member teaching the course must insure the core SLOs are adequately addressed in the pedagogy, pacing, educational materials, learning environment and assessment strategies of the individual classroom. A question often asked is: Can individual faculty choose different strategies and course materials to help students achieve the same core SLOs? The answer is, “that depends on whether the strategies are appropriate to help students learn the intended SLOs.” Accreditation standards ask institutions to analyze learning and to use the results to guide improvements in learning by changing pedagogy, curriculum, etc. (Standards II.A.1.c, II.A.2, II.A.2.a, b, e and f). So, diverse strategies among faculty members will be a means of identifying diverse approaches to high quality education and, over time, of identifying which strategies should be abandoned in favor of more effective approaches. In addition, some faculty may want or need to emphasize *additional* SLOs within a course. As long as students are notified of all course SLOs, this practice is acceptable. (See the last question and answer in this article.)

Must SLOs appear in official institutional documents such as the official course outline or catalogue? Since a course must have a single set of core SLOs, it is

¹ The Course Outline of Record: A Curriculum Reference Guide, adopted Spring 2008 by the Academic Senate for California Community Colleges.

reasonable to expect those SLOs to appear in the official course outline which guides the faculty teaching the course.

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The Commission's use of the phrase "official course outline" refers to the document used by the institution to define its official curriculum. Should the SLOs appear in the catalogue? The catalogue serves as a contract between the institution and its students. Standard II.A.6 states that "the institution describes its degrees and certificates in terms of their purpose, content, course requirements and student learning outcomes." It is clear the degree and certificate learning outcomes have to be in the catalogue. In practice, some current institutional catalogues, particularly those in print copy, do not provide a great deal of detail on course content. Others do. In any case, the intended course SLOs ought to be accessible to students who are contemplating taking the course, either in the catalogue or through a link or other reference found in the catalogue.

Must SLOs appear in the faculty members' course syllabi? Yes. The answer to this question appears at the beginning of this article, in the quotation from Standard II.A.6. The Commission acknowledges that the use of the words "learning objectives" in this standard appears to be vestigial language from the 1994 Standards. The Commission is currently editing the standards to change the words "learning objectives" to "student learning outcomes."

Just as important as the existence and placement of SLOs is their assessment and the use of assessment results to improve educational effectiveness and learning. These topics will be covered in future articles appearing in this newsletter.