

Topic: What Is the Difference Between a Student Learning Outcome and a Program Outcome?



Office of Assessment
and Evaluation
at Virginia Tech

Introduction

Each academic program at Virginia Tech should have 5 to 8 student learning outcomes (unless otherwise specified by a discipline-specific accreditation requirement) and 2 to 3 program outcomes.

What Is a Student Learning Outcome?

Student learning outcomes specify the key knowledge, skills, abilities, or competencies that students in a particular degree program should know, have, or be able to do upon completing the program. They complete the statement “At the end of the program, students will be able to... .” Student learning outcomes should be specific to a particular academic degree and distinguish one degree program from others offered within the academic college or university.

A good student learning outcome:

- Addresses an observable, attainable knowledge area, skill, ability, or competency
- Is narrowly focused and measurable
- Is stated at the appropriate cognitive level for the degree (bachelor’s, master’s, or PhD) and based on the expectations of the program
- Is related to the mission of the program and/or university
- Is meaningful to the program

What Is a Program Outcome?

Program outcomes reflect the services a program provides or delineate programmatic student achievement areas (e.g., retention and graduation rates). Program outcomes should reflect areas in which the program both wants to and can improve. They are distinct from program requirements that all students must meet in order to graduate. A good program outcome:

- Addresses a specific action, behavior, or achievement
- Is narrowly focused and measurable
- Is achievable or can be improved upon if not achieved
- Is related to the mission of the program and/or university
- Is meaningful to the program

Examples of Student Learning Outcomes

From undergraduate programs:

Upon completion of X program,

- students will be able to effectively communicate scientific information in written form.
- students will be able to effectively communicate orally.
- students will be able to identify major philosophical figures and texts and their historical context.
- students will be able to explain various creative and technical roles involved in producing a theatrical or cinematic production.
- students will be able to solve and discuss a business problem using Y techniques.
- students will be able to evaluate international issues within Y context.
- students will be able to apply the Y theory to a real-world scenario in the field.
- students will be able to explain the core biological concepts related to evolution and principles of genetics.
- students will be able to explain how past events in the area of Y impact contemporary society.

From graduate programs:

Upon completion of X program,

- students will be able to identify research questions or problems pertinent to their field of study.
- students will be able to communicate research effectively in both written and oral forms using language appropriate to the field of study.
- students will be able to synthesize relevant literature in the field of X.
- students will be able to demonstrate the ability to design and complete creative works.
- students will be able to formulate hypotheses and design research studies.
- students will be able to effectively apply ethical standards when conducting research.
- students will be able to critically analyze scientific research and findings.

Examples of Program Outcomes

From undergraduate programs:

- Students in X program will engage in experiential learning activities (e.g., internships, service learning, undergraduate research, or study abroad experiences).
- Students graduating with X degree will be employed in X industry or a related field within 12 months of completing the program.
- Students enrolled in X program at the end of their sophomore year will complete the program within 4 semesters.
- The X program will increase the graduation rate of its students.
- Students graduating from X program will obtain licensure within 12 months of completing the program.
- The X program will increase recruitment of students as first-time freshmen and as transfers from other Virginia Tech degree programs.
- The X program will develop new courses to meet discipline-specific accreditation requirements.

From graduate programs:

- Within 6 months after graduation, MS students in X program will have continued on in an advanced degree program or secured employment within the field.
- The X program will secure graduate student funding for a minimum of 20 students.
- PhD students in X program will be the primary author on a refereed publication at the time of degree completion.
- Students in X program will present research results at a regional or national conference.
- The X program will provide teaching opportunities for PhD students.
- MS students in X program will complete their degree within 4 semesters.
- The X program will increase the diversity of its applicant pool.
- The X program will develop partnerships with neighboring colleges and universities to attract their students into the program.

Contact: If you need assessment assistance or have questions regarding assessment, please feel free to contact the Office of Assessment and Evaluation by email at oe@vt.edu or calling 231-6823.