

OUTCOMES AND OBJECTIVES

ONE IMPORTANT ASPECT OF ASSESSMENT THAT has caused confusion in some instances is a matter of definition: the distinction between “outcomes” and “objectives.” These terms have been used interchangeably on some campuses and in Title 5, and documents from the Accrediting Commission for Community and Junior Colleges (ACCJC) have sometimes added to the confusion on this issue. The 2002 standards of the ACCJC require that “learning objectives” be included in course syllabi: “In every class section students receive a course syllabus that specifies learning objectives consistent with those in the institution’s officially approved course outline” (II.A.6, emphasis added). Despite the specific language used in the standards, most colleges interpreted that the ACCJC intended this statement to refer to student learning outcomes, and indeed the ACCJC itself subsequently corrected the term “objectives” to read “outcomes.” This conflation of terms has produced confusion regarding accreditation requirements and debate concerning the application of both terms.

To further confuse this issue of definitions, the Academic Senate for California Community Colleges’ own perspectives have shifted over time, both regarding distinctions between terms and student learning outcomes in general. The Senate’s 2004 paper *The 2002 Accreditation Standards: Implementation* offers the following statement regarding outcomes, objectives, and assessment:

The SLOs requirement represents two sides of an equation: expectations and measures . . . objectives are the knowledge and skills for which students will be held accountable; outcomes are the evidence of accountability. According to the ACCJC, Student Learning Outcomes are the “knowledge, skills, abilities, and attitudes that a student has attained at the end (or as a result) of his or her engagement in a particular set of collegiate experiences” (ACCJC Standards Adopted 2002, Standards Glossary, p.6). While ACCJC language suggests that many educational elements are measurable, it is unlikely institutions can accurately quantify “attitudes” or anything as amorphous as “abilities.” As a result, the standards embody a reductive approach to accountability, and many argue that the practice moves local community colleges ever closer to standardization.

These definitions of outcomes and objectives, which were a response to requirements from the ACCJC, do not establish a clear distinction between the terms. The overall tone of this passage and much of the paper from which it comes is skeptical and resistant.

Over the years since the 2004 paper was written, as faculty have appropriately taken increasingly greater control of SLO processes, the Senate’s position has altered. The *SLO Terminology Glossary* produced in 2010 by the Senate and the Research and Planning Group defines objectives as small steps that lead toward a

goal, for instance the discrete course content that faculty cover within a discipline. Objectives are usually more numerous and create a framework for the overarching student learning outcomes which address synthesizing, evaluating and analyzing many of the objectives. (ASCCC, 2010, p. 10)

In contrast, the *SLO Terminology Glossary* defines student learning outcomes as follows:

Student learning outcomes (SLOs) are the specific observable or measurable results that are expected subsequent to a learning experience. These outcomes may involve knowledge (cognitive), skills (behavioral), or attitudes (affective) that provide evidence that learning has occurred as a result of a specified course, program activity, or process. An SLO refers to an overarching outcome for a course, program, degree or certificate, or student services area (such as the library). SLOs describe a student's ability to synthesize many discrete skills using higher level thinking skills and to produce something that asks them to apply what they've learned. SLOs usually encompass a gathering together of smaller discrete objectives (see definition on previous page) through analysis, evaluation and synthesis into more sophisticated skills and abilities. (ASCCC, 2010, p. 13)

These definitions offer a more practical differentiation between outcomes and objectives. The *SLO Terminology Glossary* is careful to note that it “does not dictate terminology nor does it seek to be comprehensive.” Still, the tone and the content of the definitions demonstrate the shift in the Senate's position from one of skepticism and even resistance to one that promotes faculty ownership and control of SLO processes.

On a local level, certainly the most important aspect of SLO assessment is not the terminology employed but rather the results achieved through the assessment process. No matter what terms are used, faculty engaged in SLO activities must understand the difference between the content of the class and the steps that establish the framework for student learning on one hand and the overarching, observable knowledge, skills, or behavior to which those steps should lead on the other. One must determine exactly what results one wishes to examine before one can decide what data to collect and what methods to use in order to complete the assessment. However, the goal of the Academic Senate is to provide leadership and guidance on a statewide level, and the absence of a consistent vocabulary may inhibit productive discussion of effective assessment processes. For this reason, the distinction between outcomes and objectives as defined in the *SLO Terminology Glossary* is important for the purpose of creating an ongoing statewide dialogue regarding meaningful assessment practices that will enhance both teaching strategies and student learning at the local level.