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## Developing Course-Level Student Learning Outcomes:

How can course outlines be used to articulate course-level student learning outcome statements?

Presentation #2, October 13, 2003

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### A. BACKGROUND INFORMATION:

In our first presentation, we noted that some faculty have found that clarifying the instructional objectives for a course was a good starting point for their assessment efforts. A key resource for such efforts is the "course outline of record." As noted in the Academic Senate's publication "Components of a Model Course Outline of Record" [http://www.academicssenate.cc.ca.us/Publications/Papers/Model\\_outline.htm](http://www.academicssenate.cc.ca.us/Publications/Papers/Model_outline.htm)

"The course outline of record plays a critical educational role on campus. It is the primary vehicle for course planning [and articulation]. When a course is revised or updated, it is the course outline that records the changes. As such, it forms the basis for a contract among the student, instructor, and institution identifying the expectations which will serve as the basis of the student's grade and giving the fundamental required components of the course which the student is guaranteed to receive from the instructor and institution."

California Education Code Title V (Section 55002) specifies that the unit value, scope, objectives, and content of courses are required components of the course outline of record. The Academic Senate recommends that the objectives in the course outline of record (See "Components of a Model Course Outline of Record"):

\* State in measurable terms what students will be able to do: "upon completion of the course the student should be able to..."

\* Be concise but complete: ten is too many; one is not enough.

\* Use verbs showing analysis: rather than "understand," "identify" or "describe" say "explain" or "compare and contrast."

\* Adequately cover theory, principles, and concepts. Use skills and applications to reinforce and develop concepts. Don't add concepts to supplement skills.

\* Be broad and introductory in scope, not too advanced, narrow, or specific.

In comparing the above properties of course objectives to the definition of student learning outcomes (component #1) in our first Listserv presentation, one sees many similarities. However, to use course objectives to define course-level learning outcomes, faculty will need to review them to ensure that they are: 1) specific enough to be meaningful for instructional and assessment practices; and 2) up-to-date and accurate reflections of the shared understandings of those teaching the course.

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B. PUTTING IT INTO PRACTICE: Strategies for Using Course Outlines to Articulate Course-Level Outcomes:

1. Dr. Arend Flick, Riverside Community College (RCC) English instructor, says that the RCC English faculty found the course outlines to be a useful device to begin discussion of learning outcomes. Yet, he notes that, in large part, they found them too vague, and obsolete (even though they had been "updated" recently), to be of use without further refinement. He subsequently developed a survey that was sent to RCC English instructors asking them to rate the importance (essential, important, unimportant, and not applicable) of various instructional objectives in the college-level composition course. The discussion generated by the survey findings helped to sharpen instructors' shared understanding of the learning outcomes for this course and will lead to revisions of the course outline of record.

2. Janet Fulks, Bakersfield Community College Biology instructor, remarks that their course outlines also needed revision. She notes that they "tended to be too detail- and content-oriented." Developing appropriate course-level outcome statements requires a good understanding of the prerequisites and the student population(s) being served. They also found that their curriculum document over-emphasized cognitive outcomes. Fulks notes that it "required some healthy exploration and dialogue to actually develop psychomotor and affective outcome statements."

3. Dr. Susan Mills, RCC Math instructor, notes that the objectives in their Elementary Algebra course outlines were sufficiently specific that they could use them directly in their assessment plans. Their discipline was able to construct common final measures that assessed these objectives.

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B. OTHER RESOURCES:

Janet Fulks notes that there are some professional organizations that have worked hard to formulate content areas and learning outcomes for specific courses. An example is the American Society for Microbiology (ASM). On the ASM website they have posted the core themes and content from which I developed my SLOs - they can be seen at:

<http://www.asm.org/Education/index.asp?bid=10051>

See the American Psychological Association Task Force's report on learning goals and outcomes for undergraduates at:

<http://www.apa.org/ed/pcue/taskforcereport.pdf>

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D. REQUESTED FEEDBACK: At your college, have you used course outlines to articulate course-level student learning outcomes? If so, how did you use them? What were the advantages and disadvantages of the approach you used?

### Summary of Feedback from Presentation #2

Dear Subscribers,

Below is a summary of the responses we received on the Course Outlines presentation we posted last week. Thank you for the many thoughtful comments.

Your moderators - Rick, Jerry, & Bob

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Moderators' Summary #2:  
Summary of Feedback from Presentation #2  
October 20, 2003

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#### A. GENERAL OBSERVATIONS:

As many of you noted, the course outlines of record contain potentially useful information for developing assessable course-level learning outcomes. The value of the learning objectives identified in the course outlines depends upon the:

- 1) process through which they were developed - Were the course objectives developed through an inclusive dialogue among the faculty teaching the course? How recently has this been done? It is often difficult to get discipline faculty together for such discussions, especially when there are large numbers of adjunct faculty involved.
- 2) relation to institutional-level and program-level learning outcomes - Some colleges have begun their assessment efforts by developing institutional-level outcomes (e.g., Mendocino College - reported by Lynda Myers (lmyers@mendocino.cc.ca.us)). Once defined, the institutional-level outcomes are used to frame discussions of program-level and course-level outcomes. Regardless of where one begins, there will ultimately need to be a process for aligning the various levels of learning outcomes.
- 3) Alignment with actual instructional practices - Are the course outlines merely documents on a shelf or do they guide actual instructional practices?
- 4) Conversion into assessable learning outcomes - As noted in our last presentation, course objectives only address one aspect of a learning outcome (i.e., what the student can do at the end of a course). To make them into assessable outcomes, one also needs to specify: the conditions under which they should be able to do it, and how well they should be able to do it.

5) Relation to other program and curricular development processes - Do the course objectives get regularly reviewed and discussed within institutional processes to keep them current and aligned with program- and institutional-level outcomes? Some colleges (e.g., San Diego Miramar College - Lisa Brewster (lbrewste@sdccd.cc.ca.us), Riverside Community College - Rick Axelson (rick.Axelson@rcc.edu) - have redesigned their program review processes to include such discussion.

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## B. ADDITIONAL TIPS & UPDATES FROM THE FIELD:

1. Bonnie Jaros [Jaros\_Bonita@sac.edu], Curriculum and Instruction Council Chair at Santa Ana College reports that they have just completed an effort to revise their course outlines of records to contain student learning outcomes (SLO's). She provided the following sketch of the process. "Two years ago or so, ... [we convened a] task force ... about SLO's, assessment etc. We made recommendations to revise the SAC Mission statement, the General Education Philosophy Statement-- both approved by the Board of Trustees last spring. We also developed seven SLO's which should be cross-disciplinary. I then requested that we pilot those at the course level in the form of new outlines. We hashed out a possible outline and several departments from different disciplines put courses on this potential outline. From this we developed a new, generic Course Outline of Record. It is in its final stages of development."

2. Lisa Brewster (lbrewste@sdccd.cc.ca.us), San Diego Miramar College, writes "... while the integrated outlines serve the purpose designed, they do not accurately display course learning outcomes. Consequently, we have looked at ways of developing useful, measurable course level outcomes. Therefore, we have looked at Program Review as a way to mandate these. However, one cannot create course level outcomes without looking at the entire program so starting January 2004, all programs will be required to develop program learning outcomes. As the team leader of the 21st Century Project and the Activity Director of a Title III grant, I will work with department chairs and programs to develop meaningful, measurable learning outcomes. Once, all of the programs have developed program learning outcomes, a committee of peers (one representative from each school) will review the outcomes and ask relevant questions or raise concerns. Once this has been completed, then departments will begin developing student learning outcomes for each individual course to determine how the courses fit into the program learning outcomes (and also justify why other courses need to be added). We have not discussed if these will replace the course level outcomes on the integrated course outlines..."

3. Joan Thomas-Spiegel (thomasjk@lahc.edu), LA Harbor College, suggests the following exercise for helping to align instructional practices with course objectives.

"My favorite [exercise] is a simple grid (that I think Fred Trapp and/or Brad Phillips used last year). The first thing is to list the [course] objectives in order of priority. Then taking

their course syllabus, the instructor sees if they give the most points, spend the most class time, give the most assignments, in such a way that their number one priority is covered well and receives an appropriate amount of attention. This is often an eye-opener. The instructor does not need to show anyone else what he or she has done at this point. Then, give the instructor the opportunity to "realign" by either changing the syllabus/lesson plan or by changing the priorities. ...

Working in small groups, the instructors can now share what they feel is appropriate. (e.g. Wow! I thought treating people fairly and objectively from different backgrounds was a really important outcome, but I realized I had no assignment that would help the student learn to do so.)"

4. In discussing ways of creating consensus about course objectives and aligning instructional practices, Arend Flick (Arend.Flick@rcc.edu), Riverside Community College, says "...It probably varies from discipline to discipline, but for us (to repeat) it did help to work collectively toward a learning outcomes statement, to think (at meetings) of places to distribute that statement (e.g., as part of a new handbook for all English instructors at RCC), and perhaps above all to do a reading of sample English papers in which we were forced to talk about the alignment of practices and outcomes." Dr. Flick also stressed the important role curriculum committees can play in this process when they look at (and for) outcomes and related practices when they approve (or reapprove) new courses.

5. Gordon Lam (lamg@flc.losrios.edu), Los Rios, writes "...the colleges in our district all have a common course outline that identify "course objectives for each of the courses contained in the curriculum. They are affectionately referred to as the "Form 4". In the case of history related courses, these stated objectives in the outline often employ the term "demonstrate..." as the key verb describing what we want students to be able to know or do.

The challenges to this approach is that while there is this set of "stated objectives" in the course outline, it leaves an entire set of "implied objectives" that must also be deduced and added by each instructor in the developing their respective course syllabi. I believe, at least in my case, it is insufficient to just transfer those course outline objectives to represent the ones specific to my delivery of that course. That is especially true when there is an expectation that the student also master some other knowledge, technique, procedure that are adjunct to "demonstrating" a particular objective identified in the course outline.

6. Deborah Charlie (dcharlie@avc.edu), Curriculum Committee co-chair, Antelope Valley College, notes that their curriculum committee has been requiring "measurable student outcomes" on course outlines of record (CORs) for the past 6-7 years. "We built our COR based upon the state senate's "good practice" document (which was based upon material from the Chancellor's office), so when faculty developed a new course or revised one, they needed to speak specifically to outcomes. Those of us on curriculum (and new faculty coming to the campus) find that they are an effective way of both designing and describing what we expect from our students in a given course. Most faculty have found

that the process makes them think beyond course content (which is where the emphasis of or COR used to be) and consider not just what they want to teach, but what they want students to learn. However, some senior faculty members (even to this day) feel that the practice is burdensome and forces them into using jargon (Bloom's taxonomy); nevertheless, their CORs eventually come with clearly stated outcomes.