PROGRAM EDUCATIONAL OBJECTIVES AND STUDENT OUTCOMES: SAME BUT DIFFERENT

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Program educational objectives are the broad statements that describe the career and professional accomplishments that the program is preparing graduates to achieve. Student outcomes are statements that describe what students are expected to know or be able to do by the time they complete an academic program.

Program educational objectives differ from student outcomes in at least four ways: degree of specificity, role of constituents, purpose of assessment and cycles of data collection.

Degree of specificity: Graduates of the program go into a variety of career/work environments: graduate school, industry, business, entrepreneurial activities, military, etc. The context within which graduates will manifest the learning outcomes (what they learned by the time of graduation) will vary widely. That is, there is no one common environment for graduates of the program to demonstrate the objectives. As a result, to define the program educational objectives in narrow ways is counterproductive to the process. Program educational objectives are, by their nature, broadly stated and should not be narrowly defined. In contrast, student outcomes are, for the most part, the result of shared experiences of students. Except for a limited number of elective courses, all students experience the same curriculum. In order to understand whether these outcomes have been met, it is critical to develop measurable performance indicators which identify the performance(s) required to meet the outcome. The achievement of the performance indicators should be confirmable through evidence.

Role of constituents: Program constituents (or "stakeholders") are those who have a vested interest in the success of the program. The role of constituents in determining and reviewing objectives is essential to programs meeting their needs. Although one could argue that students, parents, community, etc. are program constituents, for the process of establishing the objectives, the program generally looks to employers, alumni, faculty, and perhaps graduate schools when determining what graduates of the program will need in order to be successful in their careers (program educational objectives). For student outcomes, the faculty are the primary stakeholders to determine the outcomes that will enable students to achieve the objectives after graduation and how those outcomes will be integrated into the curricular and co-curricular activities. Although some accrediting agencies might mandate specific outcomes, programs need to be sure that the outcomes of their program represent the program and institutional mission as well. The faculty "own" the curriculum. That is not to say that program advisory boards could not have a meaningful role in the development of curriculum; however, ultimately it is the faculty responsibility to define the outcomes in ways that are measurable and to design curriculum to attain the outcomes that finally support achievement of the objectives.

Purpose of assessment: Program educational objectives are developed with input from the program's constituents. The purpose of involving constituents is to determine if the current program educational objectives continue to be relevant to the profession and the program. The assessment of student outcomes at the program level is to determine whether the students are achieving the outcomes and to identify the strengths and weaknesses in their learning that will serve as a source of action for program improvement.

Cycles of data collection: Data collection for determining the currency of objectives may take place less frequently (e.g., only every three years) than outcomes assessment depending on the cycles that have been developed by the program and the rate at which a discipline is changing. Student outcomes, however, should be assessed on a more frequent, continuous cycle. That does NOT mean that data must be collected on every outcome each year. However, it is important that programs develop a systematic process for data collection that smooths the process out over time. Focusing on a limited number of outcomes each academic year will enable a program to have two- or three-cycles of data collection, evaluation and improvements for a six-year accreditation cycle. This means that data do not need to be collected on every student for every outcome and that not all faculty need to be involved in the data collection process in any given year.

Understanding the needs of constituents to promote graduate success (program educational objectives) and preparing students with the knowledge and skills to meet those needs (student outcomes) are foundational to the continuous improvement process. Both require assessment and evaluation in a systematic process. Understanding the differences will help to develop processes that work best for the program.