

# Writing Effective Statements for Assessment of Student Learning

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**Abstract:** The checklist rubric provided here will aid in writing good student learning outcome (SLO) statements and mapping these to broader SLOs or goals. The rubric is based on more detailed information within this document, including the definitions for four terms needed to prepare student learning outcome and goal statements, using the Bloom taxonomies to match outcome statements to students' and curricular needs, avoiding dangerous verbs that can produce outcomes that are difficult to assess, and understanding the mapping of outcomes. Assessment is not about showing high gains or pleasing an accrediting agency. Instead, assessment is about gaining understanding of our students and the degree to which they are succeeding in achieving the good aspirations that we have for their success. These aspirations are what brought us here, and the better we support one another in meeting these, the more pleasure we will get from our chosen professions.

Checklist Rubric for Authoring Effective Learning Outcome Statements	
	<b>Check for awareness of "backwards design:"</b> Does a course or program student learning outcome support a larger scale goal or objective? (Not all SLOs need do this but sufficient course level outcomes must map to higher level goals and outcomes so that the program outcomes are well supported by the content of the required courses. Similarly, appropriate college and/or institutional goals should be supported by programs.)
	<b>Check for focus:</b> Does the student learning outcome contain an appropriate action verb and focus on a single specific content topic for performance?
	<b>Check for awareness of matching students' needs:</b> Do you know the Bloom level of the challenge for this outcome? Is this outcome aligned with the needs and capabilities of the students at this stage of their intellectual development in this stage of their curriculum? Students' needs should change as they progress through curricula. Most emphatically, the graduate experience should differ from the undergraduate experience. The differences are articulated through the differences in learning outcomes.
	<b>Check for practicality:</b> Is the student learning outcome measurable with reasonable time and effort? Provide a specific answer to "How will we assess this outcome?" in order to clarify the instruments needed and effort required. For a course or program, try to create about 4-6 outcomes. Too many may be impractical to achieve, assess, or map.
	<b>Check for alignment:</b> Does the student learning outcome match the planned instructional activities and assessments?
	<b>Check for clarity:</b> Does the student learning outcome specify observable behavior under the appropriate conditions for measuring performance? Can a student reading this SLO understand what is expected as he or she prepares to demonstrate ability to meet this SLO challenge?

## Basic Language of Assessment Statements

*If a university adopts a common assessment language for use on its own campus, the assessment documents it creates will be less frustrating to prepare and less confusing to use.*

Institutions need a common language of assessment so that stakeholders can gain understanding as they prepare, review or use assessment documents. No matter what our institution, the core of the assessment process lies in articulating what students will be able to do at the end of any learning event, be it a class, a course, a major program or a degree. In correct everyday communication, we use some applicable terms such as "evaluation" and "assessment" interchangeably. The same is true for the nouns "goals," "outcomes," and "objectives." However, all of these terms have distinctly different meanings in higher education assessment. When we are writing about assessment of student learning, we cannot revert to everyday use of these terms.

In each discipline, a major respected national or international professional organization takes care of maintaining a glossary for the discipline. For assessment, we now lack such a national organization, although one once existed as the American Association for Higher Education (AAHE) until 2005. Fortunately, our own Western Association of Schools and Colleges (WASC) regional accreditation agency now offers the first glossary provided by a

regional accrediting body in its forthcoming new handbook. This has a chance of growing to a national standard, and I have aligned our HSU terminology with WASC's. To view the *Draft 2013 Handbook of Accreditation*, visit <http://www.wascenior.org/content/draft-2013-handbook-accreditation>.

Good practice keeps jargon simple and minimal. Using a few terms with clear meanings allows rapid revision of important institutional documents to conform to new changes in language. Here, we define just five terms: evaluation, assessment, goal, outcome (as "student learning outcome"), and objective (as "student learning objective"). In practice, it is possible to pick either "outcome" or "objective" and reduce five terms to four. WASC recently moved towards doing so by choosing "outcome" over "objective." These four are adequate for most applied purposes.

Accreditation organizations for some disciplines such as education, business, engineering, etc. coin terminology for their own use, and none are likely suitable to apply to everyone else in the institution. Several established professional programs must gain accreditation through their own professional organizations. Such programs should not be duly burdened by requiring preparation of two sets of assessment documents under two conventions. They should use the jargon employed by their own program's accrediting organization within their program's documents. For example, all documents prepared by a College of Education for use for its own programs could use the terminology employed by The National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE).

Documents written for general University use, such as for general education courses, should use the terms adopted by the University, regardless of which programs might generate these documents. For example, if a College of Education furnished a course that met a general education requirement, the College should use the terminology of the University (here, that of WASC) in the proposal and assessment documents that accompany that course instead of the special terminology of NCATE. Because the intention is to serve the general University, all in the Institution need to understand the documents used to describe and advertise the course.

### **Assessment *versus* Evaluation**

***We assess learning; we evaluate individuals.***

Assessment of student learning is a reflective, iterative, ongoing, formative process done for the purpose of finding ways to improve student learning success. The process consists of four basic action steps: 1) defining learning outcomes; 2) choosing a method or approach and then using it to gather evidence of learning; 3) analyzing and interpreting the evidence; and 4) employing this information to improve student learning. Assessment does not involve reporting the performance of individuals. Instead, it examines individuals' learning in aggregate—at the levels of classes, programs, colleges, and universities.

- (1) *Defining learning* involves articulating in specifics via goal, objective and outcome statements (see below) the learning deemed as most important to student success and making these explicit and available to all stakeholders.
- (2) *Choosing a method or approach* involves specifically answering "How?" an outcome is to be assessed. Some methods include: exams (ideally those of known validity and reliability), concept inventories, knowledge surveys, learning journals, papers, performances, products, reports, and presentations rated with rubrics that make performance criteria explicit.

- (3) *Gathering, compiling analyzing, and interpreting the evidence* about students' learning is focused on the relevant criteria and standards considered in Step (1).
- (4) *Employing this information to improve student learning* generates a feedback loop that informs instructional practices, guides changes in design of curricula and instruction, and reveals how the assessment process itself (actions 1-3 above) can be improved. This Step 4 is what gives the assessment process its iterative qualities of continual attention to self-improvement within units and institutions.

Evaluation is a process that employs summative measures that generally result in a judgment about individuals' performance. While assessment of student learning and evaluation processes are related, they do differ, and it is best not to use the terms interchangeably.

Evaluation of student learning employs measures made for the purpose of making summative decisions about each student. Examples of evaluation are grades and competency ratings. Evaluation tools include graded tests, reports and term papers, performances and projects. Examples of expressions of evaluation are course grades and grade point averages of students. Grades or scores express an individual's general performance, but these expressions do not disclose the specific learning regarding *what* the individual did to achieve a performance rating.

## **Goals**

***Goals are general and not directly assessable; outcomes/objectives are specific and directly assessable.***

Goal: a broad statement of a general aspiration that is not directly measurable. In WASC usage, "Goal" applies at the institutional scale of a very general statement of learning expected of graduates, as derived from the institution's mission, vision, and values. To help clarify the meaning of three terms to follow, we provide both personal and higher education examples.

- a. Personal goal: "I want to climb mountains."
- b. Learning goal: "Our students should achieve science literacy."

Broad goal statements are useful for "big picture" concepts of learning, such as those that describe signature quality of graduates from particular universities or programs. Usually, a goal statement invites a probing question such as: "Well, you want to climb mountains, so what would you like to climb first?" or "If students are science literate, what are they able to do that distinguishes them from others who are not science-literate?" Good goal statements are indirectly assessable by directly answering such specific, probing questions. The specific answers to these statements hold a key to being able to assess the goal. While we cannot directly assess a goal, we can assess it by suitably answering the probing questions that relate to the goal. Statements called objectives or outcomes capture the specifics that we need to address.

## **Objectives versus Outcomes**

***We cannot assess aspirations; we can assess the results of acting on aspirations.***

"Objective" and "outcome" are words that have myriad everyday uses. In fact, these are the most confused words in higher education documents. While at CSU Channel Islands, before WASC created a glossary, three of us on a Program Assessment Review Committee collected over forty glossaries that institutions themselves had assembled, and found "objective" as the most inconsistently used term. "Student learning objective(s)," or "student learning outcome(s)," always using the three words together, helps clarify reference to measurable knowledge, skills,

values, or attitudes/dispositions in which students must demonstrate proficiency through some observable action(s) or generation of appropriate product(s).

Student Learning Objective: *a statement of intent* that is specific and measurable.

- a. Personal objective: "In climbing mountains, I want to be able to hike to elevations of 14,000 ft."
- b. Student Learning Objective: "Students will be able to distinguish a testable hypothesis from statements that are not testable."

Note how both of the above objectives relate to their respective goal statements above.

Student Learning Outcome (SLO): SLO statements can be identical in wording to student learning objectives, and this invites confusion. Outcomes and objectives differ in that the outcome is targeted for assessment through answering "What happened?" with regard to whether the objective was acted upon and what resulted from the action. The difference is subtle but important when collecting good assessment data. We do not assess aspirations or intentions. To obtain data about learning, we have to address the results that come from acting on aspirations in some way that we can observe. For example, see the following in how the outcome statement is assessed.

- a. Personal outcome: "In climbing mountains, I want to be able to hike to elevations of 14,000 ft." (Assessment: I hiked Mount Evans, Colorado, and reached the summit that lies above 14,000 ft.)
- b. Student Learning Outcome: "Students will be able to distinguish a testable hypothesis from statements that are not testable." (Assessment: A standardized science literacy test revealed that in a general education course, 57% of students were able to make this distinction at the start of the course and 60% were able to make this distinction at the end of the course.)

Note again how these outcome statements relate to their preceding respective goal statements.

In K-12 education, use of "objective" is dominant. In higher education accreditation, "student learning outcome" has become predominant. WASC usage in its new 2013 Handbook has replaced "objective" with "outcome." Our best choice likely lies in aligning our use of terms with our regional accreditor's (WASC) usage. From here onward in this document, we will use "outcome" and avoid using "objective."

Assessment literature frequently abbreviates "student learning outcomes" as "SLOs" for brevity in all text. Not all stakeholders who read assessment documents will be familiar with this acronym, so an assessment document should define the "SLO" abbreviation when first used, and thereafter make use of the abbreviation.

### **For Clarity, Employ Modifiers that Specify Scale**

We can assess learning events at any scale: at the fine scale of lessons within a class or at the larger scales of courses, programs and degrees. Using the scale term as a modifier conveys clear meaning and avoids increasing jargon. Some examples are "lesson SLO," "program-level SLOs....," "university goal" and "course SLOs...." In general, institutional assessments involve working at the larger scales of courses and above. Assessment at the fine scale of lessons is more likely to serve as important feedback to instructors rather than to serve as material to be reported.

## Guidelines for Writing Effective Student Learning Outcomes

### Choosing Well

We cannot assess everything we teach, so what we choose to assess should be important. A path to choosing truly important SLOs lies in "backwards design." That means to start at the largest possible scale, which is probably the institution, by visiting the mission or vision statement. The qualities that we aspire for our students to have when they complete their degrees, which are perhaps the most important things to know that the institution is doing well, have likely been formulated within the institution's stated goals and mission statement. The five goals associated with HSU's mission define the characteristics of

- (a) *being student-centered,*
- (b) *promoting diversity of people and perspectives,*
- (c) *practicing social and environmental responsibility,*
- (d) *being involved in the community, and*
- (e) *promoting responsible economic development.* (Note that responsibility is the only characteristic mentioned twice.)

With that setting in mind, as one writes outcomes at the successively smaller scales of college, program, course and lessons, it is good to ask how/if we can intentionally support some aspects of that larger mission. In doing so, we often are also able to verify how our particular program etc. is distinctive and different from an equivalent program at another institution.

### General Education

Courses offered by the program that meet the institution's general/liberal education requirements are the most obvious place to document where and how a program supports the larger mission. These institutional outcomes are usually metadisciplinary rather than disciplinary because the outcomes are drafted in special categories or divisions such as "science," "humanities," etc. The outcome can be met by taking one or more courses chosen from the offerings of several disciplines that lie within the division.

If the programs in a metadiscipline can come together and produce a common assessment(s) such as through a signature assignment with a rubric that is created to address the metadisciplinary outcome(s), this is probably a best situation for all.

### Programs/Majors

Programs that support majors common to any well-established discipline will have similar curricula, so it is likely that most of the high-priority outcomes that any program's faculty will author for a major will have equivalents in programs of that discipline at other institutions. Yet, if something is unique about a program, such as a special emphasis, a special clientele served, or an alignment with supporting a special aspect of an institutional mission, it is wise to assess one SLO through which to document success in that particularly distinctive quality.

All faculty that support a program need to be aware of changes that occur in their own offerings. Otherwise, there is no way to coordinate a curriculum or for instructors of later courses to understand what they can depend upon having been built for them within the earlier courses.

## Alignment Checks

One important alignment check is consistence between the goals and outcomes being addressed and other documents that describe the same learning event. If the event is a course, the description of the course in the catalog should be consistent with the outcomes we present in syllabi to students and what we will assess from the course. A good syllabus will likely contain the catalog description and a list of the SLOs for the course. These SLOs should be consistent with those contained in the archived record of the course that passed through the curriculum review approval.

Check the mission statements of the college and institution. If someone asks how our course or program supports our particular college or institutional mission, we should be able to explain how learning at the smaller scale supports our larger scale aspirations.

When we author good student learning outcomes, we must always have a clear answer to the question: "How will we assess that?" Examples of assessments could be "papers, projects or presentations graded with rubrics," "tests and quizzes" (ideally those that have some known reliability and validity). Included with the "How?" is "How will the data be archived so that I can draw on it when needed?" As a time-saver, the data should be archived in electronic form rather than on paper.

A path to a most destructive situation lies in writing SLOs that are unassessable, and then launching into the labor of trying to assess these. This drains time, energy and demoralizes professors when their efforts culminate in no product of value. Aim to write outcomes that clearly disclose a meaningful challenge that students will respond to with an observable action. "Meaningful" means an item that we value regarding a competency that our students should be able to display at the completion of an instructional event whether that event is a lesson, course, program, or a university degree.

*Be careful about using verbs that generate SLOs that are difficult to measure objectively.* The following are notorious for generating outcome statements that become difficult to assess.

<i>Students will be able to...</i>	Cover	Realize
Appreciate	Familiarize	Study
Be aware of	Gain knowledge of	Understand
Become acquainted with	Know	
Comprehend	Learn	

If you utilize such verbs as "know" or "appreciate," make sure that you can state *how* a student would demonstrate "knowledge" or "appreciation" with varied degrees of competency. Student learning outcomes should be specific, measurable, acceptable to the instructor, realistic to achieve, and, where appropriate, time-bound with a deadline.

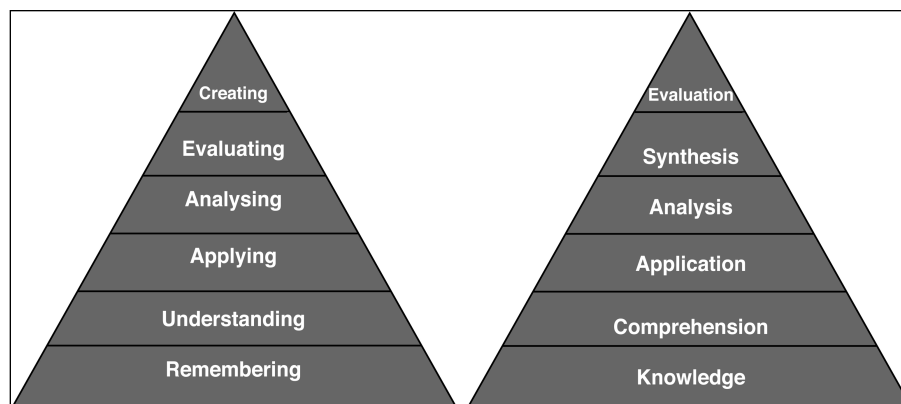
## Using the Taxonomies of the Cognitive Domain to Write Student Learning Outcomes

Student learning outcomes may target a range of skills or cognitive processes. Taxonomies exist that address three domains of learning: cognitive, affective, and psychomotor (Table 1).

Domain	Target	Focus
Cognitive (Bloom, 1956) or new Bloom (2001)	Knowledge, intellectual skills	Mind
Affective (Krathwohl, Bloom and Masia, 1964)	Attitudes, interests, feelings, values, adjustments	Emotion
Psychomotor (Harrow, 1972 Simpson, 1972)	Motor and manipulations skills	Body

**Table 1. Three domains of learning. Understanding all three is important for learners.**

The domains are useful for addressing particular kinds of content, but this does not mean that they are exclusive or incorporate separate areas of the brain. For example, cognitive learning seldom occurs without invoking affective feelings. Willingness to pay attention and to undertake learning are affective qualities through which college students commit to undertake cognitive learning. However, to write student learning outcomes, we usually focus on the cognitive domain. The most utilized is Bloom's Taxonomy of the Cognitive Domain. Figure 1 shows the original classic (1956) version of this taxonomy and a newer updated (2001) version.



**Figure 1. Left, updated Bloom taxonomy by Anderson and others (2001) Right, original classic taxonomy of Bloom team (1956.)**

The newer Bloom taxonomy employs verbs whereas the original uses nouns. In the new version, synthesis and evaluation have changed places, with "creating" being the action of synthesis stressed as the higher cognitive level. In general, as one performs the kinds of tasks described in proceeding from the base to the apex of either triangle, the "cognitive load" or demands to incorporate and process larger amounts of information increases. Some users still prefer the original Bloom taxonomy to the revised one. The classic version may work better in disciplines where the ultimate goal is to generate an evidence-based decision; the newer may work better if the ultimate goal is to generate a high quality product, especially if the product is unique.

Table 2 shows that the relevant verbs used in the outcome statement can help us to know what Bloom cognitive level we address when we write an outcome. A well-designed curriculum will likely have introductory courses that are heavy in lower level learning with a few higher level challenges, and the upper division courses will have less low-level learning and more challenges at the levels of synthesis and evaluation.

<b>Domain</b>	<b>Emphasis</b>	<b>Relevant Verbs often Used</b>
<b>Cognitive</b>	<b>Knowledge:</b>	
	Recall data or information.	acquire, define, distinguish, identify, label, list, name, order, recall, recognize, reproduce, state
<b>Cognitive</b>	<b>Comprehension:</b>	
	Understand the meaning, translation, interpolation, and interpretation of instructions and problems. State a problem in one's own words.	abstract, classify, comprehend , convert, explain, extrapolate, formulate, illustrate, indicate, interpret, represent, select, transform, translate
<b>Cognitive</b>	<b>Application:</b>	
	Use a concept in a new situation or unprompted use of an abstraction. Applies what was learned in the classroom into novel situations in the work place.	apply, carry out, compute, demonstrate, employ, explain, generalize, implement, instruct, operate, perform, plan, predict, prepare, repair, sequence, solve, solve , use
<b>Cognitive</b>	<b>Analysis:</b>	
	Separates material or concepts into component parts so that its organizational structure may be understood. Distinguishes between facts and inferences.	analyze, breakdown, catalog, classify, compare, contrast, detect, determine, differentiate, discover, discriminate, dissect, distinguish, estimate, examine, explore, interpret , investigate, observe, order
<b>Cognitive</b>	<b>Synthesis:</b>	
	Builds a structure or pattern from diverse elements. Put parts together to form a whole, with emphasis on creating a new product, meaning, or structure.	appraise, assess, assess , check, criticize, defend, determine, evaluate, evaluate, judge, judge, justify, measure, rank, select, support, test, verify, weigh
<b>Cognitive</b>	<b>Evaluation:</b>	
	Make evidence-based judgments about the value of ideas or materials.	Evaluate, verify, assess, test, judge, rank, measure, appraise, select, check, judge, justify, evaluate, determine, support, defend, criticize, weigh, assess
<b>Affective</b>	"The product of the brain that produces the sense of feelings and emotions that are "complex but internally consistent qualities of character and conscience." (Krathwohl, Bloom, and Masia, 1964, p.7).	acts, agree, appreciates, avoid, cooperate, discriminates, displays, help, influences, join, likes , listens, modifies, offer, participate, performs, practices, praise, proposes, qualifies, questions, revises, serves, solves, support, supports, verifies
<b>Psychomotor</b>	Includes physical movement, coordination, and use of the motor-skill areas. Development of these skills requires practice and is measured in terms of speed, precision, distance, procedures, or techniques in execution.	adjust, bend, chooses, describes, detects, differentiates, distinguishes, identifies, isolates, measure, moves, operate, perform, relates, repair, selects, taste, use

**Table 2. Emphasis of three domains with cognitive levels differentiated and key words often used to evoke that emphasis. To see differentiation of the levels of the affective and psychomotor domains or to learn more about these, consult the references cited or contact Ed Nuhfer at [edward.nuhfer@humboldt.edu](mailto:edward.nuhfer@humboldt.edu).**

The wording of student learning outcomes can help guide both instructional activities and assessment. Instructors should carefully select the emphasis of learning and the relevant verb. To see examples of outcomes written at different Bloom levels, go to the site at <https://uwaterloo.ca/centre-for-teaching-excellence/teaching-resources/teaching-tips/planning-courses/course-design/writing-learning-outcomes>, click on "templates and examples" and



thereafter on the red font Bloom levels. The outcomes shown are primarily SLOs at the level of lessons rather than more generalizable course items.

When we relate a specific outcome to a goal, or a course outcome to a broader programmatic outcome, the language of assessment refers to this as "mapping" the outcome to the goal. Figure 2 reveals an example of mapping. Note that in Figure 2, the outcome Number 4 of History 211: "Evaluate the impact of environment on human history" provides a challenge at the level of evaluation in the Bloom taxonomy. The right hand column shows where this particular challenge in History 211 "maps." Faculty who created the outcomes decided that this course outcome supported (mapped to) the larger programmatic outcomes of numbers 2, 3, and 4.

PROGRAM OUTCOMES								
Students graduating with a major in HISTORY will be able to:								
1	show good understanding and knowledge of the history of North America;							
2	show good understanding and knowledge of global history in other regions of the world;							
3	demonstrate good knowledge and problem solving skills in analyzing contemporary and historical events;							
4	demonstrate good communication skills in oral and written forms; and							
5	demonstrate command of good skills in historical research, analysis, and presentations.							
Outcome ID #	Program	Course#	outcome#	Outcome Statements. Students will be able to...	Assessable?	How?	Is outcome now being assessed??	Maps to Program #
HIST211-4	HIST	211	4	Evaluate the impact of the environment on human history	Yes	Written examinations requiring students evaluate diverse cultures from the perspective of their use of environmental resources and their manipulation of human societies to take advantage to scarce resources	Yes	2, 3, 4

**Figure 2. Portion of an Excel® file used to track and map course outcomes to programmatic outcomes.**

Constructing an Excel® file for a program in the format of Figure 2 allows a writer of outcomes to query how one can assess the outcome at the time of writing the outcome. Simultaneously, one can consider if or how the outcome contributes to the larger departmental vision as expressed in those outcomes. The Excel® sheet allows all stakeholders to see the entire program in one file. The ability to count and sort inherent in the Excel® software empowers users to collate, sort and manipulate data.

**Summary Tips for Improving the Value of Student Learning Outcome Statements:**

- Use backwards design. Become mindful of higher level institutional, college goals and outcomes before striving to write programmatic outcomes that will support these or course outcomes that will support the program outcomes.
- Student learning outcomes have two parts: an action verb that ideally indicates a Bloom level of challenge and the specific content addressed by the action.
- Author a few well-chosen outcomes to assess rather than many. After compiling a list, arrange it in order from top priority downwards. From this, try to select only about four to six SLOs to publish and assess. It is best to focus on achieving a few things well with your students rather than generating a long list of outcomes that are impractical to achieve or assess. However, a few professions may be stuck with more, as stipulated by their own professional and/or accreditation organization.

- Keep outcome statements short and focused on a single outcome. Never try to author compound outcomes as a way to get more outcomes into fewer statements. Compound outcomes introduce a terrible complexity to assessing them.
- Ensure that SLOs are measurable. Provide a specific answer to "How will we assess this outcome?" as a defense against publishing an outcome that could later prove too difficult to assess.
- Student learning outcomes should clearly convey the expected student action.
- Be mindful of constructing a curriculum that aligns with students needs. Build basics as appropriate at the early stages and increasingly challenge students with more high-level student learning outcomes as you move into upper level and capstone courses. An introductory course with too many high level outcomes will actually be detrimental to student learning success. Students start by doing synthesis and evaluation poorly. Most students need at least two years of practice in grappling with divergent thinking and open-ended challenges before they can do synthesis and evaluation well. Carefully designed curricula can produce high-level reasoning capabilities; single courses cannot do this.
- Within a department, SLOs for graduate programs must specify outcomes that distinguish them from the department's undergraduate programs.
- Utilize student learning outcomes as a basis for course preparation. Student learning outcomes should match instructional strategies and assessment requirements.

Assessment is not about showing high gains, reaching perfection, or pleasing an accrediting agency. That is uninspiring and even stressful. Instead, assessment is about gaining understanding of our students and the degree to which they are succeeding in achieving the good aspirations that we have for their success. These aspirations are what brought us to teach. The information gained from assessment can fuel truly enjoyable, supportive conversations about how we could best succeed in these aspirations. This offers opportunities to share in some collective creativity as we take risks and invent ways to do better what we recently did the next time we do it. We deserve to have some fun in this profession, and being creative for producing success is one way to call in excitement and enjoyment.

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### Very Useful Site for Assessment Information

<http://www2.acs.ncsu.edu/upa/assmt/resource.htm>

Acknowledgment: This document was inspired by an earlier document created at Park University in Missouri, and some material that appears here still derives from that document. See this at <http://www.park.edu/cetl/quicktips/writinglearningobj.html>.