



Writing and Evaluating Graduate Level Student Learning Outcomes

An effective graduate program establishes a curriculum of course work and provides instruction, mentoring, and other learning experiences to enable graduate students to acquire the knowledge and skills needed to engage in “independent research and professional practice” in the discipline and make a “contribution to the profession or field of study” (p. 69, SACSCOC, 2012).

Student learning outcomes (SLOs) written for graduate level courses and Academic Learning Plans must reflect the progressively more complex and rigorous expectations associated with graduate study (SACSCOC Principle 3.6.1). One expectation for graduate level courses is that the SLOs should reflect learning based on academic content that is clearly more advanced and rigorous than that described in undergraduate SLOs. Program level SLOS for graduate curricula must describe advanced content “knowledge of the literature of the discipline” and skills required for “ongoing student engagement in research and/or appropriate professional practice and training experiences” (SACSCOC Principle 3.6.2).

In some cases, graduate schools and graduate councils have identified general learning outcomes that apply to all graduate programs. For example, Michigan State University identified three goals for both master’s and doctoral programs:

- Acquire advanced knowledge and a deeper understanding of the skills and knowledge in their disciplines □
- Develop a sense of responsibility to as well as an understanding of the ethical dimensions of the discipline □
- Develop the competence, knowledge, and independence for the realization of leadership potential. (p. 151, Funk & Klomparens, 2006)

Similarly, the Graduate School at Cornell University identifies a common set of four proficiencies for graduate programs that include *progressively more advanced student learning outcomes for master’s and doctoral candidates* for two of these proficiencies. Note the additional SLOs and bolded language, which describes more advanced SLOs:

Contribution to Scholarship (Master’s)

Make a contribution to the scholarship of the field.

Contribution to Scholarship (Doctoral)

Make an original and substantial contribution to the discipline.

Think originally and independently to develop concepts and methodologies. Identify new research opportunities within one’s field.

Research Skills (Master’s)

Learn advanced research skills.

- Synthesize existing knowledge, identifying and accessing appropriate resources and other sources of relevant information and critically analyzing and evaluating one’s own findings and those of others.
- **Apply** existing research methodologies, techniques, and technical skills.
- Communicate in a style appropriate to the discipline.

Research Skills (Doctoral)

Demonstrate advanced research skills.

- Synthesize existing knowledge, identifying and accessing appropriate resources and other sources of relevant information and critically analyzing and evaluating one’s own findings and **those** of others.
- **Master application** of existing research methodologies, techniques, and technical skills.
- Communicate in a style appropriate to the discipline.



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Note the use of behavioral language in these SLOs that describes higher -level skills in Bloom's Taxonomy (behaviors that correspond to higher levels of cognition such as analysis, synthesis, and evaluations). Additional information about writing measurable SLOs, Bloom's Taxonomy, and creating curriculum maps can be found on the CUTLA web site (URLs are listed below).

Evaluating Student Learning Outcomes

When writing or reviewing SLOs, consider the following guidelines and expectations:

- Student learning outcomes should be written in *measurable* language. They should describe knowledge, skills, abilities, dispositions, and/or attitudes in behavioral terms that imply direct measures of student learning (either by direct observation of student performance or evaluation of a student work product).
- Student learning outcomes should be written in language that students, parents, and individuals outside the discipline will understand.
- The number of SLOs written for a course or program is less important than the level of expertise represented by the knowledge, skills, and abilities described in the SLOs. A course with high-level expectations might be described with a small number of SLOs that describe complex skills that assume acquisition of lower-level knowledge and skills in pre-requisite courses.
- Keep in mind that student learning outcomes **are not any of the following:** course goals, course descriptions, a list of course topics, course content outlines, descriptions of teaching techniques, learning activities, or course processes or procedures.
- Graduate level SLOs should describe expectations for student learning and achievement that clearly represent higher-level cognitive skills (analysis, synthesis, evaluations) than those expected of undergraduate students.

CUTLA Resources on Student Learning Outcomes and Curriculum Maps

Assessment Resources, including an introduction to Bloom's Taxonomy

<https://uwf.edu/academic-affairs/departments/cutla/services-for/assessment/>

Guidelines for Curriculum Maps

<https://uwf.edu/academic-affairs/departments/cutla/supporting-pages/curriculum-maps-guidelines/>

Writing Student Learning Outcomes for Course Syllabi

<https://uwf.edu/cassh/academic-programs/general-education/faculty-resources/general-education-syllabi/>

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