

IOWA

Division of Student Life

GUIDELINES FOR OUTLINING GOALS, OBJECTIVES, & OUTCOMES

Goals, objectives, and outcomes are the foundation of effective assessment and program design. This guide walks you through how to outline goals, objectives, and outcomes that are clear, meaningful, and measurable. Together, these components support intentional planning, assessment, and continuous improvement.

START WITH THE BIG PICTURE

Before outlining goals, objectives, and outcomes, clearly identify what your program, service, or experience is trying to accomplish.

Ask yourself:

- What is the purpose of this program or service?
- How does it connect to departmental, divisional, or institutional mission?
- What change should occur because of participation?

Example:

The purpose of the student leadership workshop is to support undergraduate students in developing foundational leadership knowledge and skills. This will prepare them for involvement in student organizations and campus activities.

DEFINE THE GOAL

Goals are broad statements that describe the overall intent or purpose of a program or service. They explain what you hope to accomplish but are not directly measurable.

Best practices:

- Keep the statement broad and aspirational
- Focus on the program or service rather than the participant
- Align with mission and values

Example:

Increase student leadership capacity and engagement across campus.

DEFINE THE OBJECTIVES

Objectives are more specific than goals and describe what the staff or instructor intends to achieve within a defined time frame. Objectives are staff or instructor focused and guide planning and delivery.

Best practices:

- Be specific and time bound
- Focus on what the program will do
- Break the goal into actionable components
- Support and clearly connect to the stated goal

Example:

- The leadership workshop will introduce students to core leadership concepts and terminology.
- The leadership workshop will provide structured opportunities for students to reflect on their leadership strengths.
- The leadership workshop will connect students to campus involvement opportunities where leadership skills can be applied.

WRITE LEARNING OUTCOMES

Learning outcomes describe what participants will know, be able to do, or value because of the experience. Outcomes are learner focused and should be measurable.

Learning outcomes often address:

- Knowledge
- Skills
- Attitudes or values

Standard format: Students will be able to... (SWiBAT)

Best practices:

- Focus on one behavior per outcome
- Use clear and observable action verbs
- Describe learning rather than participation
- Ensure outcomes are meaningful, attainable, and measurable

Example:

- Students will be able to identify two leadership styles.
- Students will be able to describe one personal leadership strength.
- Students will be able to explain one way to apply leadership skills within their student organization.

IDENTIFY CRITERIA FOR OUTCOMES

Criteria describe what meeting a learning outcome looks like. They make expectations clear and help determine whether an outcome has been achieved.

Best practices:

- List 2-4 observable criteria for each outcome
- Focus on behaviors, skills, or evidence that can be seen or measured
- Ensure criteria clearly connect to the learning outcome

Example:

Learning Outcome: Students will be able to explain one way to apply leadership skills within their student organization.

Possible criteria:

- Clearly describes a specific leadership skill relevant to their organization
- Explains how that skill would be applied in a real organizational situation
- Connects the application of the skill to their role or responsibilities within the organization

PRIORITIZE YOUR OUTCOMES

Not every outcome needs to be assessed. Prioritizing outcomes helps focus assessment efforts on what matters most.

Best practices:

- Distinguish between outcomes that are needed versus nice to have
- Identify the 1-3 outcomes that must be met to know the program did its job
- Consider time, capacity, and available assessment methods

Example:

For the leadership workshop, the program team determines that the most essential outcomes to assess are students' ability to identify leadership styles and apply leadership skills in a campus context. Outcomes related to awareness of additional involvement opportunities are considered supportive but not the priority.

CHECK ALIGNMENT

Strong goals, objectives, and outcomes align upward from specific to general. Alignment ensures that outcomes support broader priorities and mission driven work.

Ensure alignment across:

Program learning outcomes

Program objectives

- Program goals
- Departmental goals

Divisional and institutional mission

If outcomes do not clearly support the goal, revise for clarity or focus.

Example:

The learning outcomes focused on leadership skill development support the program goal of increasing leadership readiness. That goal aligns with the department's emphasis on student engagement and the division's commitment to student success through educationally purposeful experiences.

WHAT TO AVOID

- Using vague or hard to measure terms such as "understand" or "appreciate"
- Combining multiple outcomes into one statement
- Writing outcomes that describe activities rather than learning
- Mislabeling objectives as learning outcomes

Example:

Poor outcome: Students will understand leadership.

Revised outcome: Students will be able to explain one way to apply leadership skills within their student organization.