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A Common Sense Approach to Assessment & Accreditation

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What are the characteristics of well-stated learning goals?

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When I help faculty and co-curricular staff move ahead with their assessment efforts, I probably spend half our time on helping them articulate their learning goals. As the years have gone by, I've become ever more convinced that learning goals are the foundation of an assessment structure...and without a solid foundation, a structure can't be well-constructed.

So what are well-stated learning goals? They have the following characteristics:

They are outcomes: what students will be able to do after they successfully complete the learning experience, not what they will do or learn during the learning experience. *Example: Prepare effective, compelling visual summaries of research.*

They are clear, written in simple, jargon-free terms that everyone understands, including students, employers, and colleagues in other disciplines. *Example: Work collaboratively with others.*

They are observable, written using action verbs, because if you can see it, you can assess it. *Example: Identify and analyze ethical issues in the discipline.*

They focus on skills more than knowledge, conceptual understanding, or attitudes and values, because thinking and performance skills are what employers seek in new hires. I usually suggest that at least half the learning goals of any learning experience focus on skills. *Example: Integrate and properly cite scientific literature.*

They are significant and aspirational: things that will take some time and effort for students to learn and that will make a real difference in their lives. *Example: Identify, articulate, and solve problems in [the discipline or career field].*

They are relevant, meeting the needs of students, employers, and society. They focus more on what students need to learn than what faculty want to teach. *Example: Interpret numbers, data, statistics, and visual representations of them appropriately.*

They are short and therefore powerful. Long, qualified or compound statements get everyone lost in the weeds. *Example: Treat others with respect.*

They fit the scope of the learning activity. Short co-curricular learning experiences have narrower learning goals than an entire academic program, for example.

They are limited in number. I usually suggest no more than six learning goals per learning experience. If you have 10, 15, or 20 learning goals—or more—everyone focuses on trees rather than the forest of the most important things you want students to learn.

They help students achieve bigger, broader learning goals. Course learning goals help students achieve program and/or general education learning goals; co-curricular learning goals help students achieve institutional learning goals; program learning goals help students achieve institutional learning goals.

For more information on articulating well-stated learning goals, see Chapter 4 of the new 3rd edition of my book [Assessing Student Learning: A Common Sense Guide](#).

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