

UNIT 4: ESTABLISHING COURSE OBJECTIVES, LEARNER OUTCOMES, AND COMPETENCIES

“A good archer is not known by his arrows but by his aim.”

–Thomas Fuller

COMPETENCIES

After completing this unit, you will be able to:

- Articulate outcomes and competencies for students engaged in a service-learning course.
- Identify meaningful roles for students and community partners in the process of writing course competencies and outcomes.
- Write service-learning objectives.

KEY DEFINITIONS

Educational Outcomes: Educational outcomes provide evidence showing the degree to which program purposes and objectives are or are not being attained, including achievement of appropriate skills and competencies by students.

Learning Objectives: The learning objectives describe the outcome competencies learners should acquire or achieve as a result of the course or curriculum. They also help provide a “road map” for planning course instruction, and define the standards or criteria by which successful learning will be measured (Bellack & Tressolini, 1999).

Competencies: Competencies are the set of knowledge, skills, and behaviors that are necessary for effective practice in a particular field or profession.

INTRODUCTION

This unit is dedicated to the process of establishing and assessing learner outcomes and competencies in the context of a service-learning course. The purpose for this single focus on the student is to ensure that faculty members are fully equipped to facilitate and evaluate student learning in a community context. Demonstrating evidence of student learning is an important motivator for developing and continuing service-learning course experiences. Since this unit focuses on student learning and assessment, the topics of evaluation and course improvement plans are discussed in more detail in Unit 6.

WRITING SERVICE-LEARNING OBJECTIVES

One recommended approach to delineating objectives for service-learning courses is to clearly identify “service” and “learning” objectives. For example, with a nutrition-focused service-learning course, a learning objective would be for students to be able to define the benefits of lifetime of healthy eating, while a service objective would be for students to be able to develop a child-friendly menu in the language of the target community. Furthermore, both sets of objectives should progress from actions that are clearly measurable and demonstrable (i.e. list, identify, and define) to those that are more complex and require the analysis, application, and synthesis of new material. At the highest level of complexity, students should be asked to criticize, critique, and recommend based on their interpretations of new material. It’s also important to prioritize the various service and learning objectives based on those that will most benefit the program in

terms sustainability. Once objectives are determined, they should be shared as widely as possible, both with students and with community partners.

Key Takeaways:

1. Course objectives should be clearly identified as learning and service objectives and then prioritized and selected according to the interests of the *partnership* rather than the individual parties involved.

TIPS FOR GETTING STARTED

The following tips are designed to help you think through the issues involved in establishing and assessing learner outcomes and competencies for a service-learning course. The order of the activities discussed below may vary depending upon the status and scope of your course development.

Review competencies for your discipline or profession and any competencies that your department or degree program has established. Reviewing competencies established by your discipline or profession or within your department or degree program will provide guidance on what decisions you make related to learner outcomes and competencies.

Engage community partners in discussions about their expectations of student learning outcomes. By drawing upon the input of community and partnership members, you will learn about the outcomes that are important to members' community. As part of this collaborative process, it is equally important to share information with community partners about the educational requirements of the course. This discussion will create an excellent foundation for identifying student activities that build upon the interests of the community and the requirements of the institution.

Engage other faculty and students in discussions about their expectations of student learning outcomes. Your service-learning course may be part of a larger institutional effort to reform the curriculum, or you may be changing your course based on your personal impressions or those shared by students and faculty. The motivation to change or enhance your course based on student outcomes can be facilitated by learning more from faculty and students. What skills and competencies are important to obtain from their perspective, and how do their impressions reflect the focus of your course, if at all?

Establish learning and service objectives for the course. Keep in mind that the objectives must reflect what learners must *do* to achieve a specific related competency. The identified objectives will tell learners the supporting skills, knowledge, and attitudes they will learn. It is common to combine learning and service objectives that indicate what learners and community partners will achieve in the community service experience. (Given the nature of service-learning, it is important that the course reflect community objectives. A more in-depth discussion regarding ways to measure community impact is found in Unit 6. Finally, objectives are measurable and observable. You may have more than one learning objective. Examples of learning objectives include: *Describe 3 models of community development; List or name 5 approaches to collaborative problem-solving; Present 2 different community organizing strategies; Write educational materials for individuals with limited literacy; Identify the unique challenges facing the field of sociology.*

Identify the competencies that your students will be expected to demonstrate following the course. As part of the service-learning course, what are the competencies— *both service and learning oriented*— that students will be expected to demonstrate? How will these competencies better prepare students for the future? For example, will students be expected to develop skills for interdisciplinary collaboration?

Will they be expected to write a letter to a state legislator? Or design a lesson plan for first grade students? Will they gain skills for community-based research? The tasks that the students are expected to perform should be appropriate, given the community setting and the expectations of members of the community.

Identify what the student must learn in order to perform the service. For example, if the students are expected to plan a community-based research project, then you may wish to present students with information about survey design, data collection, or the ethics of community-based research as part of course content.

Determine how student learning will be measured. Measuring student learning outcomes can take many different approaches. For example, you may measure student success in achieving identified outcomes through written-papers, completion of tests, formal and informal feedback, critical reflection journals, and discussions, successful completion of a specified product, focus groups, interviews, and observations. It is important that students and community partners are a part of this assessment process. For example, community partners can complete a pre-and post-student assessment form that measures their participation at the community site. Students may also complete a self-assessment of their participation in the class and community site. There are a series of useful handouts in this unit that provide examples of student measurement.

Prepare for identifying your teaching methodologies. Once you have given some thought to the tips presented in this unit, you will be better prepared to identify the appropriate teaching methodologies and additional course planning issues discussed in Unit 4.



REFLECTION QUESTIONS

- When you think about your experience as a former student, who was your favorite teacher and why? What was your favorite course and why? How was your course structured?
- How do you learn something new? Describe an example of something you have learned to do well. Was there anything unique that characterizes this learning experience? If so, what?
- What resources do you need to help design a course that is outcomes-oriented?

CASE STUDIES



The following case studies focus on key themes related to the process of establishing and assessing learning outcomes.

THE TAPESTRY OF IMMIGRATION

Adapted from An American Mosaic: Service-learning Stories (2007) edited by Carole Lester and Gail Robinson and supported by the Learn and Serve America program of the Corporation for National and Community Service and administered by the American Association of Community Colleges.

Program Description:

Service-learning was a new initiative at Chattahoochee Technical College in 2003. It became a way to strengthen the connection between the college and its community. The three-year grant provided through AACC's Community Colleges Broadening Horizons through Service-learning grant program encouraged the college to institutionalize service-learning and to work toward achieving its initial objectives.

“The Tapestry of Immigration” was an extended service-learning project spanning seven quarters, beginning in the spring quarter of 2004 and ending in the fall quarter of 2005. The purpose of this project was two-fold: first, to provide the participants' families a glimpse into the history of immigration in Cobb County and to document immigrant family histories. Second, through the collection and analysis of oral histories, the project allowed students to engage in real-life writing and research rather than a traditional library research project.

Initial conversations with the director of the West Cobb Senior Center indicated that many senior citizens were reluctant to write their histories because they lacked confidence in their writing abilities. This project provided a means to overcome this reluctance. Each quarter, students completed service hours either directly with the clients or indirectly through research and analysis or writing narratives. A total of 24 personal interviews were completed and the audio files were transcribed by a professional transcription service. Each senior received a compact disc containing an audio recording of the interview, a copy of the transcript, and a copy of the narrative. Participating composition students developed interview questions and related forms, conducted interviews, and then compiled immigration narratives based upon the completed interviews. During the three quarters in which interviews were conducted, students received two hours of interview technique training and practice.

Two English courses provided the optimal learning objectives for this project: English 191 focused on the composition of essays based on the various modes of composition and English 193 focused on the interpretation of literature and research techniques. Students in English 191 were introduced to immigration stories through their reading requirement for the term, and were asked to interview their families and write a narrative based on the results. English 193 students also focused on literature (poetry, drama, short fiction, and novels) that dealt with immigration. Students immersed themselves in immigration stories the entire quarter and conducted research that contributed to real outcomes.

Clients from Cobb Senior Services agreed to allow CTC students to interview them and preserve their stories.

Outcomes

Ninety students contributed to the project, providing more than 450 hours of direct and indirect service. Direct service hours consisted of students collecting the oral histories, and indirect service hours consisted of research and writing activities.

While the project as a whole was successful, a few administrative problems did arise in its implementation. First, even though the English 193 students received instruction and practice with interviewing, several of the interviews did not provide the anticipated rich, vivid description. Second, a few students and some seniors elected not to participate at the last minute, resulting in the need to reschedule interview appointments or develop alternative assignments. Finally, although the English Composition students practiced writing narratives and had exposure to sample immigration stories, not all of their writing met project standards.

The benefits for both students and senior citizens involved in this project, however, far outweighed the administrative problems. The students learned the value and challenges of conducting and using primary research in their writing. They also learned a great deal about world and U.S. history. In fact, many students commented that they felt they learned more from this project than they could have learned from more traditional means (i.e., from a lecture or a book). Many students became more civically engaged as a result of the project. Some students developed lasting relationships with the seniors; others continue to volunteer at the senior centers and other sites; most are now aware of issues important to both seniors and immigrants.

Case Study Questions:

- How might you write student learning and service objectives for this course?
- How might you measure the student outcomes for this course?
- If this were your course, how would you adjust your plans in the face of the kinds of administrative challenges the program faced?



A PARTNERSHIP TO CREATE A WORK SITE HEALTH PROMOTION PROGRAM

Submitted by: Elmhurst College

Program Description:

The US Department of Health and Human Services is encouraging work sites to increase the proportion of employees who participate in employer sponsored health promotion activities. According to the National Health Interview Survey, however, only a small percentage of Hispanic/Latino employees participate in such programs. The purpose of this partnership among Elmhurst College, The Center for Educational Resources, and the Marriott Hickory Ridge Conference Center is to increase access to health promotion activities for the Conference Center's Hispanic/Latino housekeeping staff. Self-efficacy theory guided the selection of the program's objectives. Based on this theory, the following assumptions were posited:

- Literacy increases access to information.
- Access to information increases knowledge.
- Knowledge increases self-esteem.
- Self-esteem increases self-efficacy.
- Self-efficacy increases active participation in health promotion activities.
- Active participation increases sense of empowerment.
- Sense of empowerment increases health promotion behaviors.

Therefore, the program's first objective is to enhance the housekeeping staff's English language and literacy skills through ESL classes. This will increase access to printed health promotion materials. The second objective is to provide health education classes that will increase knowledge related to health promotion activities. The first objective was funded by an Illinois Secretary of State's Office Grant awarded to The Center for Educational Resources; the second objective was funded by an Oscar and Elsa Mayer Foundation Grant awarded to the Elmhurst College Service-learning Program.

Activities to achieve the first objective through ESL classes are designed by The Center for Educational Resources' workplace education consultant. The classes are based on the Natural Approach Theory of Language Acquisition and meet two hours, once a week for six weeks at the work site. Elmhurst College students in three service-learning courses participate in teaching the classes:

- EDU 210 Principles and Procedures in Education
- SPN 302 Spanish Conversation
- POL 201 American Government

Activities to achieve the second objective through health education classes are designed by Elmhurst College public health nursing faculty. The housekeeping staff has input in selecting the specific health education classes that they desire. The classes meet for two hours, two to three times during an academic term. Elmhurst College students in two service-learning courses participate in designing, teaching, and evaluating the classes:

- NRS 412 Public Health Nursing
- SPN 302 Spanish Conversation

The evaluation plan for the first objective includes a literacy pretest/posttest and a posttest measuring the

housekeeping staff's perceived gain in language skills. The evaluation plan for the second objective includes return demonstrations for skills taught (i.e., CPR) and knowledge application activities at the end of each class session (i.e., planning a day's menu using the food pyramid discussed in a nutrition class). As the program moves to its second year, the evaluation plan will be expanded to include measures of self-esteem, self-efficacy, and health promotion behaviors.

The college students in each course write reflective papers describing ways their service-learning activities have enhanced their ability to achieve specific course objectives. Below are examples of their reflections:

- EDU student: I learned that teaching ESL is a possible career opportunity for me.
- POL student: The best part was working with people from a different culture.
- NRS student: Now I understand how important health promotion is.
- SPN student: This really helped my English and Spanish listening skills.

The success of the program's first year (2000-2001) is primarily due to the communication among the three partners, the housekeeping staff's motivation and readiness to learn, and the Elmhurst College students' ability to be flexible and work around the housekeeping staff's schedule (which often meant teaching at 6:30 am).

Case Study Questions:

- How might you write student outcomes for this course?
- How might you measure the student outcomes for this course?
- How might you write community objective?
- What role do you envision the program partners playing to facilitate and assess student learning?
- How might you address cultural competency in this program? For example, how would the course objectives address cultural competency? What texts or learning resources might you use to convey important messages related to culture?



SOCIAL JUSTICE IN IMMIGRANT COMMUNITIES

Submitted by University of Colorado Anschutz Medical Campus

Lauren.Clark@uchsc.edu

The University of Colorado’s School of Nursing offers service-learning opportunities for students enrolled in the one-credit Social Justice Capstone course. The course is designed for students to work in partnership with community agencies or leaders of social causes on social justice projects related to empowerment, health care accessibility, and environmental risks to minority communities. The course is a required class for all students (BS, MS, and PhD) in the final half of their academic programs. The goals of the course are written as learner competencies. Upon completion of the course, the student should be able to:

- Engage in dialogue about nursing, service-learning, and social justice issues with persons uninformed about these concepts.
- Assess the social attitudes and structures (i.e., institutional, interpersonal, cultural, sociopolitical, and financial) that ameliorate or exaggerate health risks among the people served in their service-learning environment.
- Plan a feasible Capstone Project to work toward a social justice for an identified population.
- Write reflectively about her or his role as a nurse and citizen to promote social justice in a service-learning environment.

Once enrolled in the Social Justice Capstone course, students are required to participate in a 30-hour service-learning activity and 15 hours of online instruction. The course requires each student to identify a community service activity, foster a partnership with an identified agency, identify project goals in collaboration with agency leaders, identify an evaluation plan, and participate in reflection activities through online discussion and written papers.”

Case Study Questions:

- What strengths or limitations are evident in this case study? How might your course benefit from the strengths and limitations of this case study?
- In the case study above, what tasks might students engage in that promote skills in competencies that are relevant to your discipline or profession?

CHECKLIST

The following checklist provides key components or “action” items for establishing student outcomes and competencies in your service-learning course. As part of your course design, have you:

- Reviewed competencies for your discipline or profession and any competencies that your department or degree program has established?
- Engaged community partners in discussions about their expectations of student learning outcomes?
- Engaged faculty and students in discussions about their expectations of student learning outcomes?
- Established learning and service objectives for the course?
- Identified the tasks, or competencies, that your students will be expected to perform following the course?
- Identified opportunities for students to gain skills and competencies related to disparities and culture?
- Identified what the student must learn in order to complete the task?
- Determined how student learning will be measured?



SUGGESTED WEBSITES AND ONLINE RESOURCES

Sample Forms:

[Student Self-Assessment Exercise](#)

[Student Service-learning Agreement](#)

[Community Agency Evaluation of Student-Student Performance](#)

[Community Agency Evaluation of Student-Responsibilities and Competencies](#)

[Community Agency Evaluation of Service-learning Course or Program](#)

[Community Agency Survey: A Student Post-Test](#)

[Sample Student Evaluation](#)

Sample syllabi from service-learning courses:

[Campus Compact Syllabi Database \(select Type and sort by Syllabi\)](#)

[Florida Atlantic University, Feminist Perspectives on Gender course](#)

[Metropolitan State University of Denver, Business Ethics course](#)

[Notre Dame de Namur University, Community Psychology course](#)

[University of Northern Colorado, Introduction to Gerontology course](#)

[Loyola University Chicago, Center for Experiential Learning ePortfolio Program](#)