March 14, 2014

TO: College of Arts and Sciences Faculty
FROM: Ian F. McNeely, Associate Dean for Undergraduate Education
RE: Course-level student learning outcomes

Starting this spring, all faculty are asked to include learning outcomes on their syllabi.

1. What are learning outcomes?

Learning outcomes are short, concrete statements describing the skills and knowledge students should be able to demonstrate after completing a course or degree program. The term can be used interchangeably with “goals” or “objectives” as long as the abilities in question will be meaningfully evaluated using exams, papers, and other accepted means.

The best students can infer expected learning outcomes from reading a course description and a list of assignments. Other students need to have them pointed out explicitly, typically in a short list of well-formulated bullet points. Active verbs (evaluate, analyze, demonstrate, etc.) concretize expectations better than vague ones (appreciate, study, learn, etc.).

2. Why am I being asked to do this?

First, our accreditors require it: as an institution, UO must “publish” learning outcomes for all courses and degree programs. It’s only appropriate that individual instructors write learning outcomes for their own courses. The most efficient means of “publication” is to include outcomes on syllabi. If asked, please be ready to supply yours.

Second, it’s just good policy to let the cat out of the bag about what we value. Students benefit when we are transparent. It’s also a useful exercise for us, as faculty, to sit down and articulate the outcomes we hope for and to adjust the content and design of our courses if needed.

3. How should I go about writing these?

Consider adapting one or more learning outcomes from the department(s) or program(s) your course serves. Lists will be posted at cas.uoregon.edu/adue/learning-outcomes as CAS units submit them. Also consult colleagues who teach the same or similar courses, and focus on outcomes that you are all likely to share. The list for your own course is up to you.

4. Is this the beginning of some kind of top-down “assessment” regime?

No. But like other universities, we are under mounting pressure to document, defend, and improve the value of an arts and sciences education. We must respond in a coordinated—not a centralized or top-down—fashion. More background is given at the website above.