January 10, 2014

TO: CAS departmental assessment coordinators for 2013-14  
FROM: Ian F. McNeely, Associate Dean for Undergraduate Education  
RE: Program-level student learning outcomes

To maintain our accreditation, UO must identify “learning outcomes” expected in our courses, degree programs, and General Education curriculum. Learning outcomes are short, concrete statements that describe the general skills, abilities, and knowledge that students should be able to demonstrate as the result of a course or degree program. The word “outcomes” can be used interchangeably with “goals” or “objectives” as long as the skills and abilities in question can be meaningfully assessed and do not merely set forth educational ideals or aspirations.

The need to formulate program-level learning outcomes is part of a broader “assessment” mandate being led centrally by Associate Vice Provost Ken Doxsee in Academic Affairs, with assistance from my office. This memo explains departments’ role in this effort for this academic year. I am happy to answer any questions you may have and can be contacted at adue@uoregon.edu.

The task at hand

By March 1, 2014, please submit a list of three to six learning outcomes for each undergraduate major your department or program offers. (If your major has clearly distinct tracks, list outcomes that are common to all and, separately, one or more that pertain to each track.) Send the list to Ken Doxsee at doxsee@uoregon.edu and copy me at adue@uoregon.edu.

You are also urged to do the same for each undergraduate minor and graduate program (M.A. or Ph.D.). Learning outcomes for these programs will soon be required but are not mandatory for this cycle.

Starting next year, departments, having identified learning outcomes, will need to begin the process of assessing how well they are being met. For this reason, the list of learning outcomes that you submit should carry the endorsement of your whole department even if – as we expect will be the case – it will have been formulated by a departmental committee such as a curriculum committee.

Guidelines and tips

Consult your department’s 2009 assessment plan, if one exists, to see if you have already identified learning outcomes for your degree programs. These plans were included in the PDFs that went out to department heads in December 2013. They can also be accessed at http://bit.ly/19XiO1G (scroll down to locate your unit). Even
if your learning outcomes already exist and appear to be in good shape, please revisit them systematically and in consultation with your colleagues, paying close attention to the instructions below.

To identify the learning outcomes expected in your program, you may want to begin by articulating what general skills and abilities are already implicit in the design of your major requirements. It may be useful to have the UO catalog section for your department close at hand (see http://uocatalog.uoregon.edu).

Aim for a number of outcomes that (1) is sufficient to cover the full range of skills a graduate of your program should have; and (2) plausibly allows each outcome to be assessed with a reasonable amount of effort and time. Again, three to six learning outcomes is sufficient, and each may be stated in a single sentence if you wish, or at most two or three.

To ensure that each outcome is clearly defined and can be responsibly assessed, pay special attention to the verbs. Active verbs (like “identify” or “evaluate”) are preferred; vague ones (like “appreciate” or “study”) should be avoided. For example: is it clear how one would measure whether a student has “gained an appreciation for the aesthetics of 18th-century romantic literature?” What might replace “gained an appreciation” so as to address assessable skills a student might develop that would reflect this appreciation? Perhaps: “Student will identify the specific genres of romantic literature to which selected examples of literary works belong and rationalize selection of that genre”?

When taken together, the list of outcomes will in most cases reflect multiple levels of learning, ideally a preponderance of higher-levels (e.g. “application,” “analysis,” “synthesis,” and “evaluation”), over basic levels (“knowledge” and “comprehension”).

**Requirements for future years**

*Starting in 2014-15, we will turn from the formulation to the actual assessment of learning outcomes. Further instructions and ample guidance on this effort will be provided at a later date. The guidelines below are provided for informational and planning purposes only and are not part of what needs to be accomplished by March 1.*

Learning outcomes are typically assessed through a combination of direct measures (e.g. evaluation of a research paper in a capstone course or performance on a comprehensive examination) and indirect measures (e.g. a student survey, focus group, or series of exit interviews). Grades and GPAs are typically not reliable enough, or sufficiently granular in the information they provide, to serve as the sole means of assessing learning outcomes.
Note that not every outcome will need be assessed every year, nor is it necessary to assess every student: a random cross section of students of a suitable sample size will be sufficient.

Departments will ultimately need to place each of their courses in the context of program-level learning outcomes and indicate whether the course introduces the outcome ("I"), provides further development ("D"), or represents (upon successful completion) mastery of the outcome ("M"). A curriculum map is a simple and effective way to do this. Ensure that each outcome receives appropriate attention in your curriculum and that no outcomes receive more than your desired level of attention. (If this seems trivial, note that this exercise led a Biology department at a major university to recognize that no one was teaching evolution. How could this happen? “I thought someone else was teaching it.”)

Be prepared to provide information about your assessment effort, including especially the observations you make and any changes – curricular or otherwise – that you make in response to these observations. One approach is to schedule an annual two-hour department meeting to discuss assessment findings, formulate one or two action items for follow-up, and keep records of both the meeting and follow-up action(s). Academic Affairs will also provide faculty and departments with opportunities to share their findings through workshop participation, an online forum, general mailings, and other forms of dissemination.

Note that we are attempting to avoid calling for periodic assessment reports, believing that the results of assessment belong with and to the faculty. This involves walking a thin line with our accreditors, however, and success will depend critically on your responsiveness to the point just above. It is essential that you be both willing and able to provide meaningful information when it is required.

Resources on program-level learning outcomes

University of California at Riverside
http://bit.ly/1irExYU
This website links to brief learning-outcomes statements for a panoply of programs.

University of Florida
http://bit.ly/1c0jlnn
This website links to “academic learning compacts” for UF programs. Each such compact contains a list of student learning outcomes (SLOs) and a “curriculum map” showing which courses introduce, reinforce, and/or assess a given learning outcome.

University of Toronto
http://bit.ly/1lJfaob
This website contains tips on how to write well-formulated learning outcomes and avoid vagueness.
Smith College
This website describes a "no-frills" departmental assessment plan, admittedly at a very different institution from ours.

Further resources

University of Oregon Office of Academic Affairs
This website describes UO's approach to assessment.

University of Oregon Accreditation (2011-17 cycle)

Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities (NWWCU)
This website (with further links to Standards Two and Four) includes the standards imposed by our accrediting agency. Consult standards 2.C.1, 2.C.2, 2.C.5, 2.C.10, 4.A.3, 4.A.6, and 4.B.2 for more background on the learning-outcomes mandate.

Association of American Universities (AAU)
http://bit.ly/1cL1KDq
This links to a report produced by the AAU on member universities’ experiences with the assessment of learning outcomes. It is prefaced by a short executive summary.