Articulating Student Learning Outcomes

What are student learning outcomes?
Learning outcomes are measurable statements that articulate what students should know, be able to do, or value as a result of taking a course or completing a program. Learning outcomes often take this form:

As a result of participating in (program/course name), you (students) will be able to (Action verb) (Learning statement).

Some examples:

Students will describe the key characteristics of the different classes of planets.
Students will explain economic institutions, such as the Federal Reserve and stock markets.

Looking at the previous sample student learning outcomes, imagine what course lectures might entail, what learning activities might be effective, and how student learning might be measured. Use learning outcomes as a tool; let them inform your choice of teaching strategies, course activities and assessments.

Why create student learning outcomes?
Creating student learning outcomes will make it easier for instructors to:

- Make hard decisions about selecting course content.
- Design assessments that allow students to demonstrate their knowledge and skills.
- Design teaching strategies or learning activities that will help students develop their knowledge and skills.
- Measure student learning accurately and effectively.

Having access to articulated student learning outcomes (in a syllabus, for example) helps students:

- Decide if the course is a good fit for their academic trajectory.
- Identify what they need to do to be successful in the course.
- Take ownership of how they progress.
- Be mindful of what they are learning.
How can you develop student learning outcomes?

- Ask yourself: what are the most important things a student should know (cognitive), be able to do (skills), or value (affective) after completing the course/program?
- Consult a list of action verbs, which are verbs that result in overt behavior or products that can be observed and measured. Bloom's Taxonomy of Educational Objectives provides some useful verbs to write objectives for different levels of learning.
- Avoid verbs that are unclear and cannot be observed and measured easily, for example: understand, appreciate, become aware of, become familiar with, know, and learn.
- Draft a list of possible learning outcomes. Be realistic in considering what is possible for students to accomplish in your course. Only keep the most essential learning outcomes.

Next Steps

Creating student learning outcomes is the first step in a five-part process (Walvoord, 2010):

1. Outcomes: What do we want students to be able to do after the course?
2. Identify: Where in the curriculum are the outcomes addressed?
3. Measures: How well are students achieving the outcomes?
4. Revision: What changes can be made to the course to improve student achievement?
5. Re-measure: Did the revision to the curriculum work?