

Topic: What is the Difference Between Course Objectives and Student Learning Outcomes?

Introduction

There are many different phrases used to describe what we want our students to learn in a particular context. In many contexts, these phrases are used interchangeably, which can generate some uncertainty and confusion about how to define them. Often this is the case because they have some underlying components in common, such as a focus on the knowledge that students should acquire, and enough specificity that measurement can occur.

Course Objectives

Course objectives reflect specific knowledge, skills, abilities, or competencies that instructors expect students to acquire *from a particular course*. Course objectives are often very specific and detailed statements that describe the content or skills that will be taught in the classroom. In some regards, course objectives can be thought of as inputs of student learning, representing the many important details that faculty members will cover during a particular course. These objectives ultimately become building blocks for a student's learning in a program.

Examples of Course Objectives

Upon completion of X course, students will be able to:

- discuss the common characteristics of plant growth hormones.
- apply XYZ business techniques to solve problems.
- illustrate the components of DNA.
- describe major theories in the field of Z.
- analyze influential works from the impressionist era.
- explain how a t-test is performed.

Student Learning Outcomes

Student learning outcomes are informed by all the course objectives across a program, and reflect the knowledge, skills, abilities, or competencies that students are expected to acquire *from completing a program*. Examples of programs that should have student learning outcomes include academic degree programs, general education programs, and certificate programs. Student learning outcomes typically encompass numerous course objectives, and are sometimes presented at a higher cognitive level. Consequently, student learning outcomes can be thought of as outputs of student learning, representing what students should know or be able to do after completing a program.

Examples of Student Learning Outcomes

Upon completion of X program, students will be able to:

- design a commercial building plan.
- communicate effectively in both written and oral formats.
- explain how past events in the area of Y impact contemporary society.
- synthesize relevant literature in the field of Z.
- identify ethical standards for conducting research.
- analyze scientific research and findings.

Contact: If you need assistance or have questions regarding assessment, please visit the Institutional Effectiveness website at <https://aie.vt.edu/institutional-effectiveness.html>.