

Student Learning Outcome (SLO) Assessment at NOVA: Frequently Asked Questions

November 2019

1. What is outcomes-based student learning?

Outcomes-based student learning is an ongoing process aimed at understanding and improving student learning. It involves:

- Making our expectations for student learning and performance explicit and public;
- Setting appropriate criteria and high standards for learning quality;
- Systematically gathering, analyzing and interpreting evidence to determine how well student performance matches the stated expectations and standards;
- Using the resulting information to document, explain, and implement changes aimed at improving student performance.

2. What are SLOs?

SLOs stand for **S**tudent **L**earning **O**utcomes. Student learning outcomes identify **observable** and **measurable knowledge, skills, and attitudes/values** that students should achieve by the end of a program of study at NOVA.



3. Why do we need SLOs?

Student learning outcomes are required for three essential reasons:

- a) **For Faculty** – Knowledge and improvement of curriculum and pedagogy
- b) **For Students** – To improve student learning!
- c) **For Public Accountability** – Required by NOVA’s institutional accreditor (SACSCOC), the Virginia Community College System (VCCS), and the State of Virginia’s higher education regulatory body (SCHEV).

4. Who should have SLOs?

All degree-awarding programs, select certificates, and disciplines must have SLOs. Degree-awarding programs and select certificates report on the assessment of SLOs annually. Their reports are compiled into the Annual Planning and Evaluation Report for Instructional Programs. Disciplines currently report on SLOs in their in-depth reviews.

5. How many SLOs should each program have?

At NOVA, we recommend that each program have ideally 6 to 8 SLOs. SLOs consist of the essential skills and knowledge that NOVA faculty members consider necessary for students in their program to attain.

6. How often should we measure each SLO?

NOVA requires that at least three SLOs be assessed each year. All SLOs should be assessed at least 2-3 times in every 10-year period.

7. How do we measure overall student achievement of SLOs?

The most common way to gather information on SLOs is to use student assignments that faculty already conduct in their courses. These are called “embedded assessments” and provide the most direct evidence of student achievement of the SLOs.

8. What is the difference between a direct and indirect methods of assessment?

- Direct methods/measures require students to demonstrate first-hand knowledge and skills, so they provide tangible evidence of exactly what students have and have not learned. SLO assessment plans *must* include direct measures assessments for all SLOs.
- Indirect methods/measures gather *perceptions of learning, opinions about learning or reflections on learning* rather than direct demonstrations of the results of learning. Indirect measures can add to insights gained from direct measures and can be used in addition to the direct measure.

9. Why can't programs use overall course grades as a measurement of SLOs?

- A course grade is too aggregate a measure to provide accurate information about specific student learning outcomes.
- Course grading criteria (e.g., what comprises the actual grade, such as attendance) differ from assessment criteria.
- SLOs examine the culmination of several classes and activities throughout the curriculum, rather than the achievements of one course.
- Grading processes vary across instructors, sections, and semesters.

10. What is a target?

A target is a specific percentage, number score, or grade on a rubric or assignment that programs hope students will achieve on the assessment. An example is, "Students will achieve 80% or higher on the assessment."

11. How do we use the results that we gather from the SLO assessments?

The information that we gather from SLO assessments is used for numerous purposes with the ultimate goal of improving student learning. Internally, SLO assessment results provide direction for curricular changes, are used to improve educational programs, identify training needs for staff and students, support annual and long-range planning, suggest outcome targets, help the college expand its most effective services, and facilitate an atmosphere of continuous improvement. Externally, SLO results help NOVA to recruit talented faculty and staff, promote college programs to potential students, identify partners for collaboration, enhance the college's public image, retain and increase funding, and garner support for innovative efforts.

12. I have not been directly involved with my program's SLO assessments as of yet.

What is my role as a faculty member in the process?

Broad faculty involvement in student learning outcomes assessment is essential for it to be successful. Ideally, all faculty should be involved at some point in some aspect of assessing student learning outcomes. There are many ways that faculty can serve professionally- even if their course does not contain an SLO that is being assessed during the current academic year- from developing and revising SLOs, designing assessment methods, collecting data, discussing results, determining actions needed to improve student learning, and reevaluating the assessment cycle. At discipline group and pathway council meetings, SLOs and assessment results should be an important topic of discussion.

13. What is the primary goal of SLO assessment at NOVA?

The primary goal of NOVA's SLO assessment is to document and improve student learning experiences. It is not to evaluate individual faculty or students, to reduce academic freedom, or to prescribe top-down processes, but rather to foster a culture of continuous improvement led by faculty and supported by evidence-based decision making.