# STUDENT LEARNING OUTCOMES (SLOs) IMPROVEMENT ACTION(S) GUIDE

The primary goal of the Institutional Effectiveness (IE) process is to make data-guided decisions related to improving student learning. Whether SLOs have been met or not, program faculty and leadership need to determine a plan of action for the next year. Implementing enhancements and then circling back to check whether they indeed led to the desired improvement is one of the best assessment practices and is an accreditation requirement.

Occasionally, the level of student learning does not meet the desired standard. In this case, academic programs should examine potential reasons for why the standard for success was not met and then develop a set of enhancements to be put in place in the upcoming year(s). These plans should be based on the learning outcomes data and describe specific new and/or different changes to be implemented, including revising instructional materials, adding or removing topics from taught content, incorporating more hands-on activities, etc. Improvement plans may also require new or modified assessment practices or professional development. Importantly, *"[p]lans to make improvements do not qualify as seeking improvement, but efforts to improve a program that may not have been entirely successful certainly do."* (SACSCOC Resource Manual, p. 69).

In cases when SLOs are being consistently achieved at a high level for several years, it is recommended to either increase the standard for success or to add a new SLO that would address other important learning outcomes. If these changes are not feasible, academic programs should consider how they expect to maintain a high level of student learning.

Most improvement actions undertaken by educational programs fall into five categories; these changes should be considered and implemented one after another, in the order specified below:

<b><u>FIRST</u></b> : Refinements to the way learning outcomes are assessed	Because any changes to teaching and learning should be made based on reliable and valid data, which comes from a well-thought-out assessment methodology, a strong assessment design should be considered first
<b><u>SECOND</u></b> : Changes to how target content and skills are taught and practiced	Analysis of robust, rich, accurate student learning data should inform and logically lead to any, small or large, changes to the instructional process
THIRD: Adjusting expectations for levels of learning	Raising or lowering of the SLO numeric targets should happen after we made all feasible improvements to assessment methodology and instruction in response to robust evidence
<b>FOURTH</b> : Updating learning outcomes for the program	'Retiring' existing outcomes should happen rarely and typically only after the three approaches above have been exhausted; however, new learning outcomes can be introduced at any point
FIFTH: Monitoring levels of learning and/or collecting more evidence	When programs need more data to make a decision, they can choose to refrain from making changes until they have more evidence to confirm that a particular learning data trend or pattern exist, and then act upon this information

#### Improvements to the Assessment Process:

- Switch from using course letter grades and/or percentages/points to using grades and/or percentages/points earned by students on specific assignment(s):
  - Instead of using a course letter grade, choose the number of points earned by the student on a midterm reflection essay.
- Specify or change the course(s) in which assessment is conducted (align SLOs with program curriculum):
  - List the specific course number and course name (or a series) where assessment of SLOs will occur,
  - Move SLO assessment to a later course in the program's sequence to give students more time to develop mastery,
  - Move SLO assessment to a course that is better aligned with the nature of the learning outcome (e.g., assess fundamental disciplinary knowledge in a theory course as opposed to research methods course),
  - Move SLO assessment from an elective to a core course in the program's curriculum to measure learning of a larger group of students (e.g., all students in program's single major/concentration track, all majors/concentration tracks in the program, non-majors).
- Specify or change the assessment instrument(s) used to measure the SLO:
  - List the specific course assignment or learning experience (or a series) that will be used to assess the SLO,
  - Replace one assignment with another that is better aligned with the nature of the learning outcome (e.g., switch from a multiple-choice quiz to an essay to better assess student's written communication skills),
  - Use a specific subset of questions from an exam that are specifically focused on the SLO instead of using the overall exam score, which may include student performance in areas not related to the SLO.
- Change the instructions/prompts in the assessment instrument(s) used to measure the SLO:
  - Expand, shorten, rephrase, clarify, or otherwise edit the directions associated with the assessment instruments so that students better understand performance expectations.
- Design or change a rubric used to measure one or several SLOs (rubric examples):
  - Create a rubric to better assess multifaceted observable performance by a student on a single assignment using a set of predetermined expectations (e.g.,

a capstone project is used to assess 3 SLOs, each corresponding to a separate criterion on a rubric using a 3-point scale (exemplary=3, acceptable=2, unacceptable=1)),

 Change the rubric type, used dimensions/criteria, rating scale, or description of expected performance (e.g., add a previously missing important assessment criterion 'flow, logic and clarity of writing').

#### Improvements to Instructional Materials and/or Pedagogical Approaches:

- Change or add new instructional materials:
  - Provide more and/or enhanced in-class and/or outside-of-class opportunities for students to develop their knowledge and skills in certain areas (e.g., supplement a lecture with a small-group activity focused on application of learnt content/skills),
  - Conduct an evaluation of course topics for their currency and relevancy and make any necessary updates (e.g., update course syllabus and slides to include content covering some latest technological advancement),
  - Create a rubric to accompany the high-stakes, culminating/final course assignment so that students (<u>especially those from under-resourced</u> <u>backgrounds</u>) can better understand the performance and grading expectations.
- Organize or strengthen pedagogical and assessment structure:
  - Embed formal assessment of student learning into annual workflow (e.g., reserve time during faculty retreat before the start of the academic year to jointly review prepared report on SLOs, to analyze achieved levels of learning, to discuss enhancements, and to document the process),
  - Collaborate with institutional partners on assessment design (e.g., work with faculty in the <u>Center for the Advancement of Teaching</u> to enhance how a given course reinforces an SLO),
  - Arrange for standard instructional and/or assessment materials to be used in different courses and/or course sections where the same SLO is assessed (e.g., embed a set of the same 10 questions assessing a specific SLO into every final exam in course sections taught by different instructors).

### Fine-Tuning the Standard(s) for Success:

- Define or change the acceptable level of mastery:
  - Specify a minimally acceptable level of student performance on a measure of learning (e.g., decide that at least 15 correctly answered questions out of total 20 questions on a final exam (75%) constitutes a satisfactory level of content knowledge for a student successfully graduating from the program),

- Increase or decrease the minimally acceptable level of student performance (e.g., adjust the standard from at least a C (73%) to at least a B- (80%) on a term paper used to assess the target SLO).
- Define or change the threshold of acceptability:
  - Specify the minimum percentage of students who must show certain level of performance for the SLO to be considered successfully achieved by the students in the program (e.g., decide that at least 80% of majors enrolled in the course must achieve the acceptable level of mastery),
  - Increase or decrease the minimum percentage of students demonstrating the minimally acceptable level of performance (e.g., lower the standard from a 100% to at least 90% of students who defend their dissertations each year achieving a certain rating on a criterion in a rubric).

## **Updating Learning Outcome(s):**

- Retire a learning outcome in pursuit of a new learning outcome:
  - If an SLO has been assessed and has been met consistently and at high levels for many years, there is sufficient evidence that the program curriculum is effective at preparing students to demonstrate knowledge and skills associated with this learning outcome. This SLO may be 'rotated out' and another, perhaps almost as important, learning outcome can be 'rotated in'.
  - If there are changes in the academic discipline, such as new tools and technologies, fresh scientific discoveries, and/or innovative techniques, once the new content is incorporated into the curriculum, there may be a need to either select new SLOs or update existing SLOs, so they include the new knowledge sets or skills.

### Monitoring and/or Collecting More Evidence:

- Do not make any changes until more learning data is available:
  - Wait another year to collect more learning data to confirm a learning trend or pattern (e.g., in 2022-2023, students showed a slightly decreased level of learning for an SLO, but program faculty believe this happened by chance and want to see if student achievement for this SLO returns to expected levels next year).

Below is an example of a narrative as can be submitted in the IE Portal in the 'New and/or Different Improvement Action(s)' field:

Increase Standard for Success	• Because for the last three years, this SLO's standard for success has been achieved by our students, academic program faculty and the curriculum committee decided to increase the numeric target from 50% of students to 60% of students correctly answering at least 12 out of 15 target questions on the final exam.
Change Instruc- tional Materials	• The two instructors who teach MET 4400C figured out a way to address the issue of students not grasping the difference between various statistical tests used to answer common research questions. They designed an additional in-class activity that would let students practice and discuss in small groups. This activity will take about 10 minutes. To accomodate for this exercise, the instructors will cut a few slides out of their lecture for that day.
Monitor and Collect More Data	<ul> <li>This past year was the first time when we had quite a few students run out of time and not finish their final exam. We are not sure if this is indicative of a new trend or if this is a random event. The curriculum committee decided to wait one more year and see if this issue persists.</li> </ul>