

**Statement Of Mutual Responsibilities  
for Student Learning Outcomes:  
Accreditation, Institutions,  
and Programs**

*Approved by the Council for  
Higher Education Accreditation  
Board of Directors  
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**Council for Higher Education Accreditation**

One Dupont Circle NW • Suite 510

Washington DC 20036-1135

tel: 202-955-6126

fax: 202-955-6129

e-mail: [chea@chea.org](mailto:chea@chea.org)

*[www.chea.org](http://www.chea.org)*

# Statement Of Mutual Responsibilities for Student Learning Outcomes: Accreditation, Institutions, and Programs

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# Statement Of Mutual Responsibilities for Student Learning Outcomes: Accreditation, Institutions, and Programs

**T**HIS *STATEMENT* IS OFFERED TO CHARACTERIZE THE WORK OF ACCREDITORS, INSTITUTIONS, AND PROGRAMS with respect to student learning outcomes. It is intended to provide a common platform upon which to develop appropriate policies and review processes that use evidence of student learning to improve practice, to improve communication with important constituents, and to inform judgments about quality.

As the salience of student learning outcomes in accreditation increases, it is critical for the various parties involved in the process to be clear about their respective roles and responsibilities. Learning is a complex process and institutions and programs are not solely responsible for it. How much a student learns is frequently as dependent upon how much he or she invests in the process as on the conditions for learning created by institutions and programs. Furthermore, institutions and programs will always differ appropriately with respect to mission and goals and diversity has been a historic strength of American higher education. Excessive prescription in delineating roles and responsibilities should, therefore, be avoided.

The *Statement* is framed in terms of mutual responsibilities for accrediting organizations and the institutions and programs they accredit. Learning itself is about such mutual expectations. Faculty expect learners to come to learning situations prepared and committed to learn. Learners, in turn, expect faculty to create effective learning opportunities that hold them to appropriate standards and that help them attain these standards. In a similar fashion, adopting a language of mutual responsibility highlights the fact that accrediting organizations and those they review depend upon one another in critical ways. The effectiveness of the process thus depends critically on the common expectations to which institutions and programs will commit themselves responsibly to the task of review.

**1. *Accrediting organizations are responsible for establishing clear expectations that institutions and programs will routinely define, collect, interpret, and use evidence of student learning outcomes.*** While specific expectations about the provision of evidence of student learning outcomes by accredited institutions and programs will vary from accreditor to accreditor, some expectations about the nature of such evidence should be common to all accrediting organizations. More specifically, accreditors should establish standards and review processes that visibly and clearly expect accredited institutions and programs to:

- Regularly gather and report concrete evidence about what students know and can do as a result of their respective courses of study, framed in terms of established learning outcomes and supplied at an appropriate level of aggregation (e.g., at the institutional or program level).
- Supplement this evidence with information about other dimensions of effective institutional or program performance with respect to student outcomes (e.g., graduation, retention, transfer, job placement, or admission to graduate school) that do not constitute direct evidence of student learning.
- Prominently feature relevant evidence of student learning outcomes—along with other dimensions of effective institutional performance, as appropriate—in demonstrating institutional or program effectiveness.

**2. *Institutions and programs are responsible for establishing clear statements of student learning outcomes and for collecting, interpreting, and using evidence of student achievement.*** Institutions and programs have their own responsibilities for developing and using evidence of student learning outcomes. Specifically, institutions and programs should:

- Determine and publicly commit to the particular learning outcomes associated with various courses of study.

- Determine and communicate clearly to constituents:
  - what counts as evidence that these outcomes have been achieved and
  - what level of attainment of these outcomes is required to assure the quality of institutional or program offerings.
- Develop recognizable processes for regularly collecting and interpreting evidence of student learning outcomes.
- Use the results of this process to identify strengths and weaknesses or gaps between expected and actual performance and to identify and overcome barriers to learning.

**3. *Accrediting organizations are responsible for using evidence of student learning outcomes in making judgments about academic quality and accredited status.*** While it is important to avoid establishing inappropriate comparative benchmarks for student learning outcomes applicable to all institutions and programs, accrediting organizations have a clear responsibility to visibly consider student learning outcomes as they make judgments about academic quality and accredited status. More specifically, accreditors should:

- Establish and apply standards, policies, and review processes that examine how institutions and programs develop and use evidence of student learning outcomes for internal quality assurance and program improvement.
- Working with an institution or program, examine:
  - whether expectations of student learning outcomes are set at an appropriate level for the mission, student population, and resources of the institution or program,
  - whether the actual achievement levels of students against these standards are acceptable given the mission, student population and resources of an institution or program, and, in the case of the professions, the professional community served, and
  - whether the institution or program makes effective use of evidence of student learning outcomes to assure and improve quality.
- Ensure that using evidence of student learning outcomes plays a central role in determining the accredited status of an institution or program.

**4. *Institutions and programs share responsibility with accrediting organizations for providing clear and credible information to constituents about what students learn.*** Accreditation's many constituencies require different kinds of information about student learning outcomes. Some of this information should be supplied by institutions and programs and some by accrediting organizations in a relationship of shared responsibility. More specifically:

- Institutions and programs should:
  - routinely provide students and prospective students with information about student learning outcomes and institutional and program performance in terms of these outcomes,
  - regularly report aggregate information about student learning outcomes to external constituents, and
  - supplement this information with additional evidence about the soundness of institutional and program operations, overall effectiveness with respect to mission fulfillment, as well as concrete evidence of how they benefit students in other ways.
- Accrediting organizations should:
  - establish standards, polices, and review processes that visibly and clearly expect institutions and programs to discharge the above responsibilities with respect to public communication about student learning outcomes,
  - clearly communicate to accreditation's constituents the fact that accredited status signifies that student achievement levels are appropriate and acceptable, and
  - provide information about specific proficiencies or deficiencies in aggregate student academic performance, if these played a role in an accreditation action or decision about an institution or program.

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# Background

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## Accreditation and Student Learning

Student learning had been the central concern of higher education and accreditation from their beginnings. Deep commitment to student learning is a constant, even as systems for developing, supporting, evaluating, and reporting on student learning are evolving in the dynamic higher education policy environment.

Today, many institutions, programs, and accrediting organizations are hearing a similar request about student learning from a number of sources: provide concrete evidence of student academic achievement in higher education and report on this evidence in a manner that is readily understandable to the public at large. While this request is not new, it has become more pervasive during the past several years. Often described using the term “outcomes,” this call for information has emerged as an important issue for accreditation review. The public, higher education community, policy makers, and students increasingly seek to use such information about student learning outcomes as an integral part of making judgments about the quality of accredited institutions and programs. The federal government wants such information as part of its recognition of accrediting organizations as well.

The accreditation community has taken many steps to address student learning outcomes, especially during the past ten years. It is now challenged to respond effectively and coherently to the current request and the accompanying sense of urgency by providing additional information about student learning. At the same time, accreditors have the important responsibility to further inform constituents of the longstanding and complex role that student learning plays in accreditation and higher education. Both are essential if higher education is to remain free, creative, and diverse and if accreditation is to maintain a central role in our national system of quality assurance:

- There is a need for accrediting organizations to further augment the information reported about student learning resources and processes of institutions and programs with a) more information easily understood by the public about what students know and can do as a consequence of their attending various institutions and programs; b) more information about how student learning outcomes are used to inform conclusions about institutional and programmatic quality; and c) how institutions and programs employ such information to systematically improve.
- The accrediting community needs to state in many ways and in many fora that a) its commitment to student learning is historic and continuing and that this commitment transcends debates about and changes to operational and reporting systems occurring over time; b) reporting systems about student learning and student learning itself, while related, are not the same thing (and acting as though they are can pose threats to the quality and depth of student learning); and c) reporting student learning outcomes is one factor among many in pursuing optimum conditions for the success of American higher education—learning is more important and more complex than the systems used to account for it.

## Assumptions When Addressing Student Learning Outcomes

Additional attention to student learning outcomes in accreditation is a shared responsibility among accrediting organizations, institutions, and programs. The *Statement of Mutual Responsibilities for Student Learning Outcomes: Accreditation, Institutions, and Programs* describes these responsibilities with respect to providing and sharing evidence of student learning outcomes as well as using such evidence in making judgments about the accredited status of institutions and programs.

This *Statement* is based on several important assumptions about how to approach student learning outcomes in the context of accreditation of higher education. These assumptions are fundamental to preserving the most valuable features of accreditation in higher education while enhancing accreditation’s contribution to accountability. They are critical for understanding the intent of the *Statement* and for informing future discussions and decisions about devoting increased attention to student learning outcomes in the accreditation process.

These assumptions are:

1. Student learning outcomes need to be addressed within the context of this nation's decentralized, mission-based system of higher education.
2. What counts as evidence of success with respect to student learning outcomes is properly the province of each institution or program.
3. Accrediting organizations should expect institutions and programs to address student learning outcomes visibly and effectively. Accreditors set standards, but, in general, should not prescribe the nature of the evidence to be provided. In institutional accreditation, setting levels of student performance are institutional prerogatives. In specialized accreditation, threshold levels for student performance are set through published due process procedures that include the participation of accredited institutions and programs.\*
4. Any examination of student learning outcomes constitutes only one feature of an accreditation review. Judgments about quality are complex and must be based on a range of factors including the purposes, resources, processes, and values of an institution or program.

## Accreditation and Responding to Calls for Student Learning Outcomes

As indicated above, in the eyes of the public, evidence of student learning outcomes is becoming a principal gauge of higher education's effectiveness. Employers and elected officials have never been clearer in their demand that the graduates of U.S. colleges and universities should possess an increasingly specific set of higher-order literacies and communications skills. Students, parents, and the public are looking not only at the price of a college credential, but also at the quality of general education and career education that lies behind the credential. In particular, they want to know what the learning gained in these programs will mean in the marketplace of employment and in their lives as citizens and community members. Inside the academy, conversations are widening about how to organize institutions of higher education to improve undergraduate teaching and learning. Meanwhile, the growing presence of technology and distance delivery enhances the salience of student learning outcomes because traditional markers of academic achievement, like numbers of classes completed and credits earned, are often absent.

Accrediting organizations have taken leadership in the face of escalating requests for easily understood information demonstrating what college students know and can do. Virtually all now include explicit references to student learning in their standards for accreditation, often in the form of some kind of "assessment." They have responded in quite different ways and have moved at different paces to implement new approaches. In particular, what is meant by "assessment" often varies greatly—embracing such factors as job placement through student satisfaction, to self-reported gains in skills or knowledge on the part of current and former students. While important and valuable, these factors often do not constitute direct evidence of student learning outcomes of the kind currently in demand by accreditation's constituents and the federal government.

Additional response to these escalating requests will enable the accrediting community to take additional visible public responsibility for the judgments it makes about academic quality, and for the evidence on the basis of which such judgments are made. In an era of considerable skepticism about the value of many public and private enterprises, adopting this stance reaffirms accreditation's claim on the public trust. An assurance of academic quality and integrity is, after all, what the public counts on foremost from accreditors to protect them from the bogus claims of irresponsible providers and diploma mills. Responding publicly to this challenge also provides the accrediting community with a visible sense of direction in its communications with constituents—making explicit matters that accreditors, as well as institutions and programs, often take for granted. Finally, responding to these requests provides accrediting organizations with a common set of reference points as they evolve new standards and review approaches as well as a common language with which to communicate with one another.

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\*The expectations of accrediting organizations may vary here. Some institutional accreditors do not leave the determination of level of performance entirely to an institution, but may require, for example, that outcomes be at a minimum collegiate level. Some specialized accreditors go further than others in prescribing types of evidence of student learning.

The specific means that accreditors will choose to act in accordance with the *Statement* will legitimately differ. However, as much as is feasible, speaking with a common voice cannot help but reinforce the position of peer-based quality assurance in uncertain times.

## Some Answers to Key Questions about Student Learning Outcomes

**What is a “Student Learning Outcome?”** *Student learning outcomes are properly defined in terms of the knowledge, skills, and abilities that a student has attained at the end (or as a result) of his or her engagement in a particular set of higher education experiences.* Not all of the outcomes of college are confined to learning. Additional behavioral outcomes or experiences that may result from attending an institution or program include employment and increased career mobility, enhanced incomes and lifestyles, the opportunity to enroll for additional education, or simply a more fulfilled and reflective life. Hopefully, these are related to learning. Indeed, evidence that students have obtained such benefits is often used by institutions and programs as a proxy for instructional effectiveness. But such subsequent experiences, however successful, should not be confused with actual mastery of what has been taught. Similarly, student and graduate satisfaction is important, especially as it is related to persistence and the continuing opportunity to learn. But it should not be confused with student learning itself.

**What Counts as Evidence for Student Learning Outcomes?** *“Evidence” refers to the kinds of information about student learning outcomes that is most appropriate to accreditation settings.* In contrast to terms like “measurement” or “indicator,” the term “evidence” can simultaneously embrace the results of quantitative and qualitative approaches to gathering information, both of which may be useful in judging learning. At the same time, the term suggests both the context of “making and supporting a case” and the need to use multiple sources of information in a mutually reinforcing fashion. Evidence should be *relevant* to what is being claimed, potentially *verifiable* through replication or third-party inspection, and *representative* or typical of institutional or program performance. These are properties of good evidence in any setting.

Evidence of student learning outcomes can take many forms, but should involve direct examination of student performance—either for individual students or for representative samples of students. Examples of the types of evidence that might be used appropriately in accreditation settings include (but are not limited to):

- Faculty-designed comprehensive or capstone examinations and assignments.
- Performance on licensing or other external examinations.
- Professionally judged performances or demonstrations of abilities in context.
- Portfolios of student work compiled over time.
- Samples of representative student work generated in response to typical course assignments.

Information generated by methods like student satisfaction surveys, focus groups, or interviews are certainly useful in the accreditation process, but do not in themselves constitute direct evidence of student learning outcomes.

In addition to delineating the forms of evidence that are appropriate, accreditors, institutions, and programs should also consider what good evidence of student learning outcomes ought to look like. Examples of such properties include (but again, are not limited to):

- *Comprehensiveness*, or the degree to which evidence is generated about the full range of student learning outcomes established by the institution or program.
- *Multiple judgment*, or the degree to which several sources of evidence are used in a mutually reinforcing way to examine student learning outcomes.
- *Multiple dimensions*, or the degree to which different facets of student performance with respect to established learning outcomes are investigated so that patterns of strength and weakness can be identified (and addressed).
- *Directness*, or the extent to which the evidence relies upon direct scrutiny of student performance or attainment instead of indirect evidence of student achievement like graduation rates, self-reported gains, student satisfaction, or job placement.

In applying these guidelines, it is imperative for accrediting organizations—as well as the institutions and programs they accredit—to avoid narrow definitions of student learning or excessively standardized measures of student achievement. Collegiate learning is complex, and the evidence used to investigate it must be similarly authentic and contextual. But to pass the test of public credibility—and thus remain faithful to accreditation’s historic task of quality assurance—the evidence of student learning outcomes used in the accreditation process must be rigorous, reliable, and understandable.

***What is the Relationship Between Institution or Program Effectiveness and Student Learning Outcomes?***

*“Effectiveness” is a broad concept that refers to the overall attainment of the mission and goals of a particular institution or program. As such, it may embrace various kinds of behavioral outcomes for students that go beyond student learning such as employment, economic mobility, and contributions to civic and personal life. It may also include good effects that go beyond students, such as research and creative activity or service to various intellectual and geographic communities. Finally, “effectiveness” includes important organizational capacities of an institution or program that can enable it to continue to fulfill its purposes such as an adequate resource base and organizational structure, as well as mechanisms to evaluate its own performance to respond to changing conditions and improve overall performance.*

Student learning outcomes are an important dimension of institutional or program effectiveness. For example, the graduates of professional or technical programs will need to have mastered a range of cognitive and applied abilities to perform effectively on the job. Graduates of colleges and universities, meanwhile, will need to have internalized specific areas of knowledge and values—and the disposition to apply these appropriately—to fulfill such institution’s broader claims about educating graduates for citizenship or lifelong learning. Appropriate and adequate levels of student learning outcomes are thus necessary conditions for institutional or programmatic effectiveness. But they are not enough to make the broader case for effectiveness. Conversely, the case for institutional or program effectiveness is incomplete without direct evidence of student learning outcomes.

***What is “Assessment” in Relation to Student Learning Outcomes?*** *“Assessment” refers to the many means that institutions and programs use to collect and interpret evidence of their educational effectiveness. The aims of assessment are typically broader than simply gathering direct evidence of student learning outcomes, but any assessment program ought to include this feature. Some assessment approaches, such as those described earlier, are intended to gather direct evidence of student learning outcomes. Others, like student or alumni surveys, focus groups, or interviews gather more indirect evidence of both learning and student reactions to the collegiate experience. Finally, some assessment techniques are intended to gather information about favorable conditions for learning—for example, the level of student engagement, curricular challenge, or support for learning that a given campus or program provides. “Assessment” also embraces the processes used by institutions and programs to apply what they learn about learning to make improvements in teaching and learning.*

***What is a “Standard” of Student Learning?*** *“Standard” refers to a specific expectation or level of performance that an institution or program establishes for student learning. Standards are the point of comparison against which to judge the actual evidence of student learning once it is collected. For individual students, standards imply the levels of performance that students must have attained in order to successfully complete their programs. At the level of institutions and programs, standards imply the overall levels of attainment embodied in learning goals or similar statements of intended learning outcomes. Standards, in short, are the way institutions and programs make sense of evidence of student learning outcomes in terms of the goals for learning that they have established. It is incumbent upon institutions and programs to communicate not only what they want students to learn, but also at what level student performance must be in order to be judged successful.*





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**Council for Higher Education Accreditation**

One Dupont Circle NW • Suite 510

Washington DC 20036-1135

tel: 202-955-6126

fax: 202-955-6129

e-mail: [chea@chea.org](mailto:chea@chea.org)

*[www.chea.org](http://www.chea.org)*