



Accreditation Review Commission on Education  
for the Physician Assistant, Inc.

## Syllabi, Competencies, and Instructional Objectives A Guide for Clinical Postgraduate PA Program Faculty©\*

### Introduction

The ARC-PA accreditation standards for clinical postgraduate PA programs, effective March, 2007, state “For each didactic course and clinical rotation, the program must provide each PA resident with a written document that a) defines expectations, b) guides PA resident acquisition of expected competencies c) includes measurable expected PA resident competencies d) details how each PA resident will be evaluated in relation to expected competencies (B1.08) The standards also require that “Objective evaluation methods must be related to expected PA resident competencies for all curriculum components.” (C1.02)

The purpose of this document is to provide a brief description of the role of the syllabus, and the similarities and differences between instructional objectives and competencies.

### Course Syllabus

The course syllabus serves several very important functions.

- Early point of contact and connection between student and faculty
- Sets tone for course
- Describes faculty's beliefs about educational purposes
- Provides information about course logistics
- Contains collected handouts and outlines
- Defines student responsibilities for success
- Describes expected student competencies / outcomes
- Lists instructional objectives
- Describes student responsibilities
- Helps student assess their readiness for the course
- Places the course in a broader context within the curriculum
- Provides a conceptual framework
- Lists available learning resources
- Communicates use of technology in the course

In addition to those functions listed above, the syllabus may also improve the effectiveness of student note taking, can include material that supports learning outside the classroom, and can serve as a learning contract.

### Competencies

The 2006 version of the *Standards* no longer refers to ‘instructional objectives’ as the only way of indicating the expectations of student performance. More appropriately, the term competencies is used, defined as “the knowledge; interpersonal, clinical, and technical skills; professional behaviors; and clinical reasoning and problem solving abilities required for PA practice.”

Competencies refer to expected outcomes. Many of them can be, and often are, expressed in terms of multiple instructional objectives related to a specific area. Expectations are conveyed to students in course syllabi in many ways, beyond just by instructional objectives. Often faculty feel so “tied” to using the traditional format of well written instructional, behavioral objectives that they neglect to define and clarify all expected competencies for the students and how these will be assessed. It takes more than the mere attainment of multiple behavioral objectives to prepare a student for entry into PA practice.

### Instructional Objectives

Instructional objectives are used to inform students and others what the student is to achieve. They provide one method of expressing expected student competencies.

Instructional objectives are concerned with students, not faculty, and will guide them in their studies. Clearly defined instructional objectives also aid faculty in designing appropriate educational experiences.

Instructional objectives stem from the defining of preset performance standards that represent a minimal level of expected performance to be

achieved by all students and hence are key to competency based learning and evaluation.

Instructional objectives are specific and observable or measurable, rather than broad and intangible. They are tied to student evaluation and serve as a foundation for assessing the student's knowledge, skills, and performance.

### **Instructional Goals vs. Instructional Objectives**

Instructional goals are often defined as general statements that define the major purposes of a course, clerkship, or unit of instruction. They are not readily measurable and may have several interpretations. They are broad references to a general direction of the course rather than any specific description of process or outcomes. A goal may describe the intent of a course. It is that end which is hoped for at the conclusion of the unit of instruction. From a faculty perspective, goals give a general direction for selecting content but offer no specifics related to the instructional process or the expected student outcome.

Instructional objectives are defined as statements that describe what the learner will be able to do after completing a unit of instruction. In other words, an instructional objective is a statement of certain behaviors or observable actions that, when they are exhibited by a learner, demonstrate that the learner has some skill, attitude, or knowledge. Since *behaviors* are the indicator of the desired outcome, these are often called *behavioral objectives*.

Another even more descriptive definition is: *An instructional objective is a statement of an observable proficiency in which the criteria for acceptable performance is specified and measurable. The resources important in the performance of the task are also stated.*

Instructional objectives can be grouped into 2 general categories: enabling objectives and terminal objectives.

Enabling objectives are ones written to assist the student in achieving the intended behaviors *during* the course of a unit of study. Terminal objectives are ones written to indicate the behaviors expected of the student *at the completion* of the unit of study.

### **Relating Instructional Objectives to Behavioral Outcomes and Expected Competencies**

It is important to note that instructional objectives are related to intended outcomes, and **not** the process for achieving those outcomes. Therefore, the use of instructional objectives as the sole means of defining the educational experience may result in the richness of the instructional process and clinical experience being overlooked. Properly written instructional objectives are of critical importance in guiding student learning, but are only one component needed for designing the student educational experience.

PA programs develop their syllabi and instructional objectives as merely one component of the overall documentation for the program. Some programs will develop a separate policy manual to include policies and expectations for all courses; this manual will be distinct from their course syllabi. Sometimes these manuals also address forms of evaluation and student assessment of mastery of objectives. Due to the variety of approaches taken by programs, it is the responsibility of the program to inform the ARC-PA and site visitors if they chose to list student expectations in documents other than formal course syllabi and course objectives. To facilitate thorough program evaluation ARC-PA representatives will necessarily need to review any supplemental documentation provided students about policies, expectations, and evaluation of courses.

### **Writing Instructional Objectives and Competencies**

Both objectives and competencies should be specific, measurable, requiring an observable learning outcome. Many PA programs have some instructional objectives that include a long list of problems or disease entities about which the student is expected to demonstrate some behavior, i.e. *Discuss in detail, answer multiple choice, true/false and completion questions about the clinical manifestations, diagnosis, initial management and follow-up of the following problems/disease entities seen in an ambulatory care setting: (listed below as appropriate to the discipline/clerkship).*

When using such instructional objectives, programs should remember that the list of

problems/disease entities which follows the core objective must be:

- Appropriate to the discipline. Pediatrics instructional objectives should focus on pediatrics.
- Appropriate to the length of time of the course. Can the students accomplish what the program hopes they can in the time allowed or is the list merely taken from a table of contents of a textbook?
- Of the appropriate level for PA professional practice. Does the list of topics include those that should be included to prepare a PA for practice? For example, does a course on documenting the patient database include all the components of the history and physical, diagnostic studies, SOAP notes, etc?

### A Word of Caution

It is easy to become overzealous in developing instructional objectives. Developing objectives that are too specific may result in an abundance of small-scope behavioral objectives. The resulting myriad of overly specific instructional objectives will so overwhelm students, that they will pay no attention to any of the objectives.

The trick in conceptualizing instructional objectives that help rather than hinder is to frame those objectives broadly enough so that the faculty can sensibly organize instruction around them while making sure that they are still measurable.

Sometimes one broad, measurable objective subsumes many lesser or smaller-scope instructional objectives. Since taxonomies of learning build from the simpler to the more complex, it is reasonable to develop evaluation items that fit into a taxonomy level equal to *or less than* that of the objective. For example, being able *to discuss* typically requires a certain knowledge base before the discussion can occur. In this case, it might be reasonable to ask an evaluation item about knowledge level content that could be presumed under the verb "discuss."

A caution here: faculty must be very careful not to justify to themselves that the broad objective subsumes objectives that it actually does not. For example, the instructional objective that requires the student to "perform a physical exam" should not be assessed by an examination that requires

the student to "name the physical exam test used to assess a low calcium level;" nor can it be assessed by asking the student to "describe the consequences of performing a portion of the exam incorrectly." The latter two activities are not subsumed under "perform a physical exam," but are separate unto themselves.

### Checklist for Evaluating Instructional Objectives

In reviewing instructional objectives, programs should ask the following questions:

- Have the instructional objectives been stated in terms of learner behaviors as opposed to faculty performance?
- Is the terminal behavior specified?
- Are the conditions under which the behavior should occur specified?
- Are the instructional objectives measurable?
- Are the criteria of acceptable performance specified?
- Is the full intent of the instructional objectives understandable to the learners?
- Are the instructional objectives accurate expressions of the elements of instruction?
- Do the instructional objectives, as a group, form an accurate picture of what is to be learned?
- Are all of the instructional objectives complete within themselves?
- Does the style of the instructional objectives follow the standards for writing good objectives?
- Are the verbs used action verbs that can measure behavior?
- Do the action verbs indicate the depth of "understanding" or performance expected?
- Are the instructional objectives realistically achievable for the length of the learning experience?

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ARC-PA

12000 Findley Road, Suite 240  
Duluth, GA 30097

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