

Syllabi, Competencies, Outcomes and Objectives

A Guide for Clinical Postgraduate PA Program Faculty©*

Introduction

The ARC-PA accreditation *Standards* for clinical postgraduate PA programs, effective January, 2020, require that “For each didactic course and clinical experience, the program must provide each PA trainee with a written syllabus that includes instructional objectives to guide PA trainee acquisition of learning outcomes and required competencies.” (B1.06). That standard’s annotation indicates “Instructional objectives stated in measurable terms allow assessment of PA trainee progress in developing the competencies required for entry into practice. They address learning expectations of PA trainees and the level of PA trainee performance required for success.”

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, learning outcomes and competencies.

Course Syllabus

The course syllabus serves several very important functions.

- Early point of contact and connection between the PA trainee and faculty
- Sets the tone for the course
- Provides information about course logistics (e.g. location, meeting dates/times, etc.)
- Describes expected learning outcomes
- Lists instructional objectives
- Describes requirements/deadlines for successful completion
- Places the course in a broader context within the curriculum
- Lists required textbooks and available learning resources

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

Course syllabi generally include:

- course name
- course description and credits
- course goals (rationale)
- faculty instructor of record & contact information
- outline of topics to be covered
- instructional objectives
- specific expected learning outcomes
- methods of student assessment/evaluation and plan for grading

Competencies

Competencies are defined as “the knowledge; interpersonal, clinical, and technical skills; professional behaviors; and clinical reasoning and problem-solving abilities required for PA practice.” They are summative in nature and set the tone for what is required of the PA trainee upon completion of the program to enter clinical practice. When developing program competencies, programs need to identify the key qualities they require from a graduate of their program addressing the medical knowledge, interpersonal, clinical and technical skills, patient care, and clinical reasoning and problem-solving abilities in relation to the medical specialty of their clinical postgraduate program.

Learning Outcomes

Learning Outcomes are defined as “the knowledge, interpersonal, clinical and technical skills, professional behaviors, clinical reasoning, and problem-solving abilities that have been attained by the student at the completion of a curricular component, course, or program.” They establish what the PA trainee must be able to do at the conclusion of a curricular component of the program.

A useful learning outcome should:

- Focus of the desired trainee behavior
- Include specific verb, observable action
- State the desired level of performance

Learning outcomes reflect what the course assessments are intended to show -- specifically what the student will be able to do upon completing the course.

Instructional Objectives

Instructional objectives are statements that describe observable actions or behaviors the PA trainee will be able to demonstrate after completing a unit of instruction. Instructional objectives are designed to guide PA trainees in their studies and or activities and may also aid faculty (especially guest lecturers and preceptors) in developing appropriate educational experiences.

Instructional objectives are specific, observable and measurable, and provide a more detailed level of the steps needed to achieve the desired learning outcomes. They provide guidance for trainees on what to study, how to prepare and what level of performance is required for success.

Instructional/Course Goals vs. Instructional Objectives

Instructional/Course goals are often defined as general statements that define the major purposes of a course, clinical experience, 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 general intent of a course.

Relating Instructional Objectives to Learning Outcomes and Expected Competencies

Learning Outcomes and Program Competencies are both knowledge, behavior, ability and skill defined outcomes, but they occur at different times in the educational process. Learning Outcomes are to be attained by the trainee while in the program and usually occur at the end of a unit, course, or clinical experience. They are more formative in nature. Competencies refer to abilities required for PA practice and are summative in nature. Learning outcomes are integrally related to competencies and should reflect the building blocks needed to be attained as the trainee progresses towards acquisition of program competencies. Similarly, instructional objectives focus on content and skills important within each course and provide the details necessary to help the PA trainee progress towards the acquisition of learning outcomes.

Writing Instructional Objectives

Many programs have some instructional objectives that include a long list of problems or disease entities about which the PA trainee is expected to demonstrate some behavior, i.e. *Discuss in detail the clinical manifestations, diagnosis, initial management and follow-up of the following problems/disease entities seen in an ambulatory care setting.*

When using such instructional objectives, programs must remember that the list of problems/disease entities which follows the core objective must be:

- Appropriate to the discipline.
- Appropriate to the length of time of the course.
- Appropriate level for PA professional practice in the specialty of the program.

Issues in Writing Instructional Objectives

It is easy to become overzealous in developing instructional objectives. Developing objectives that are too specific may result in an abundance of small-scope objectives. The resulting myriad of overly specific instructional objectives will so overwhelm PA trainee, 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."

Instructional objectives should provide students direct guidance. Students should not be expected to assume that an instructional objective implies more than what is provided. For example, an instructional objective that requires the PA trainee to "perform a physical exam" should not be assessed by an examination that requires the PA trainee to "name the physical exam test used to assess a low calcium level;" or "describe the consequences of performing a portion of the exam incorrectly." The latter two activities are not subsumed under "perform a physical exam," and should be identified as separate objectives.

Instructional Objectives, Learning Outcomes and Student Assessment

All student assessment tools should be linked to learning outcomes and instructional objectives. Assessing and reporting on every instructional objective for each PA trainee may be impossible. However, assessment of learning outcomes serves as a foundation for assessing the trainee's knowledge, skills, and performance. Student assessment tools must provide verification that each trainee has acquired the skills outlined in the learning outcomes and are progressing to meet the program competencies. Assessment tools for each didactic course and clinical experience must parallel the expected learning outcomes identified in the course syllabi.

***Competencies* establish the target for the program**
***Learning Outcomes* are the proof of how trainees are reaching the target**
***Instructional Objectives* are the detailed steps of how to get there.**

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