

Goals, Objective, and Outcomes: A Note on Terminology

In her excellent book, *Assessment Clear and Simple: A Practical Guide for Institutions, Departments, and General Education* (Jossey-Bass 2010), Barbara E. Walvoord says

Terms: Goals, Objectives, or Outcomes?

I use the term *goals* throughout, but in various settings, you will find other terms such as *objectives* or *outcomes* (student learning outcomes are sometimes referred to as “SLOs”). These terms are used inconsistently in the literature, so don’t get hung up on the distinctions. Trying to get a whole faculty to understand and consistently employ a particular distinction among these terms may be futile. I suggest choosing one term, such as *goals*, with the understanding that the goals must be stated at various levels of generality. If your accreditor, board, or system is using any of these terms with a specific meaning, good communication practice would suggest that you use their terms when you write for them.

(p. 14)

In their assessment glossary, the Higher Learning Commission says

goals and **outcomes** are used inconsistently by member institutions in the context of assessment of student learning, to the extent that one institution’s **goal** may be another’s **outcome** and vice versa. When they use either term, the Criteria indicate through context whether the term refers to the learning intended or to how much students actually learn. ([link](#))

In light of this inconsistency and confusion, our primary concern is, regardless of terminology, that for each course and program, faculty members have articulated statements that describe what students will know, be able to do, or value by the end of the course or program in a way that is specific and measurable.

Dr. Kathleen Lis Dean ([link](#)) has indicated that for consistency in institutional effectiveness, she prefers that we call these statements *learning goals*. If programs wish, their learning goals may be less specific/measurable and then broken down into more granular statements, which would then be *learning objectives*. *Outcomes* at JCU refer to the data collected that allow faculty to judge whether or not students have met the learning goals.