

## Learning Goals: The Building Blocks of Assurance of Learning

Learning goals are one of the most critical elements of an Assurance of Learning (AoL) system. They are focused objectives, outlined on a per program basis, that provide guidance for assessing student learning. Learning goals should align with a school's mission, and outline the knowledge, skills, and capabilities a graduate should possess when leaving the school. Several areas are explored below that may assist schools with the development and measurement of their learning goals.

### Tailoring Learning Goals to Program Levels

First and foremost, learning goals at each level (undergraduate, graduate, and doctorate) should be aligned with a school's mission. Secondly, learning goals should be aligned with a program's level. For example, doctoral students need very different skills than undergraduate students. Learning goals at each level (bachelor through doctorate) also should be aligned with the stakeholders it intends to serve. Within the AACSB Accreditation Standards, the "**Assurance of Learning Overview and Intent of Standards**" section defines learning expectations at the three traditional degree levels:

***Undergraduate degree programs (bachelor's level)** in business educate students in a broad range of knowledge and skills as a basis for careers in business. Learning expectations build on the students' pre-collegiate educations to prepare students to enter and sustain careers in the business world and to contribute positively in the larger society. Students achieve knowledge and skills for successful performance in a complex environment requiring intellectual ability to organize work, make and communicate sound decisions, and react successfully to unanticipated events. Students develop learning abilities suitable to continue higher-level intellectual development.*

***Master's degree programs** educate students at a professional level that includes both the accumulation of knowledge and abilities for participation in the business world and an understanding of how to evaluate knowledge claims in their area of focus.*

- *General programs (e.g., Master of Business Administration—MBA) prepare students with a general managerial perspective and aptitude.*
- *Specialized master's programs (e.g., Master of Accounting, Master of Marketing, Master of Finance, etc.) prepare students for roles in particular areas of business, management, and other organization-related professions.*

***Doctoral degree programs** educate students for highly specialized careers in academe or practice. Graduates of doctoral programs have sufficient understanding to participate in knowledge creation in their fields of study.*

### Measuring and Ensuring Student Achievement of Learning Goals

Once a program's learning objectives and goals are established, methods should be created to measure whether or not students are achieving the desired outcomes. This can be challenging at times, as it is likely that one particular method will not adequately measure the achievement of goals across all programs. Therefore, it is best to test measurement methods with each program's learning goals in mind. The three most common approaches that schools use to measure achievement of learning include student-selection methods, course-embedded assessments, and stand-alone testing or performance indicators.

### ***Student-Selection Methods***

In many instances, schools and programs develop selection criteria for their incoming students. These guidelines help to ensure that students are capable of achieving program learning goals. For example, a Master of Finance degree program may require that incoming students have backgrounds that include higher levels of quantitative training—such as courses in calculus or statistics. This model may be effective in ensuring that the program's students are capable of satisfying learning goals associated with complex financial calculations. For schools that use student-selection methods, AACSB requires that they demonstrate that the selection process ensures that students have accomplished the learning goals.

### ***Course-Embedded Measurements***

Course-embedded measurements are typically in the form of exams, written analyses, presentations, and/or special projects. These measurements should align with the program learning goals. For example, if an MBA program has a learning goal that states, “students will develop strong oral and written communications skills,” the course-embedded measurements should determine whether or not students will truly be able to apply learned communication skills in a business environment. This may be through written analyses, examinations, oral presentations, or speaking requirements. In the end, the methods that are used should properly determine if students are achieving this learning goal.

### ***Assessing Learning Goals through Testing or Performance***

Stand-alone testing or performance indicators are measurements that are taken at certain points in the curriculum. For instance, doctoral students may be required to take a mid-point concepts/theories examination before they can continue with the research portions of their degrees. Undergraduate students may be required to take a comprehensive examination of topics in their discipline prior to graduation. Within the exam, several areas may be specifically focused on assessing learning goal achievement. Students also may be required to write a thesis or partake in a final project that will determine if a program's learning goals have been achieved.

As a school develops its learning goals, it is important to remember that the process begins with a school's mission and filters throughout all business programs. No two schools or programs are expected to have learning goals or measurement methods that are exactly the same. This allows each school to align its AoL program with its strategic orientation, as well as tailor its business programs to the needs of the students it serves.