

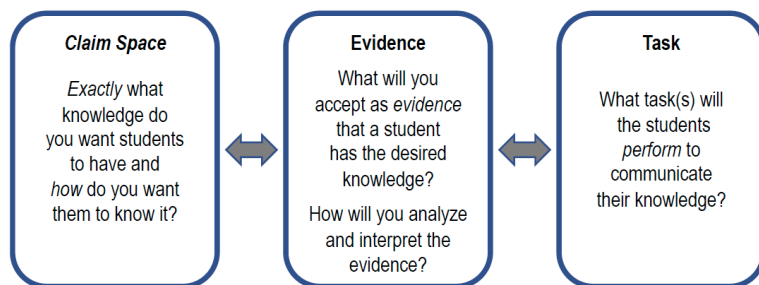
## DEGREE LEARNING OUTCOMES AT SAN DIEGO STATE UNIVERSITY: ESTABLISHING SHARED AND PUBLIC EXPECTATIONS FOR STUDENT LEARNING

*Prepared by the Office for Curriculum, Assessment, and Accreditation in collaboration with the  
University Senate Student Learning Outcomes and Program Assessment Committee*

Degree Learning Outcomes (DLOs) essentially “start at the end” by establishing the core faculty expectations for what their curriculum should empower *all* students to be able to *do* through the earning of their degree<sup>1</sup>. Such expectations are often informed by discussions and perspectives that extend beyond the faculty themselves, such as professional accreditation agencies and other stakeholders including students, alumni, and community partners. In developing their DLOs for their undergraduate degrees, faculty might consider three guiding questions:

- *What are the most important skills, abilities, capacities, dispositions, etc. that we aspire for our students to develop and demonstrate through the earning of their degree?*
- *How can we express these aspirations through perhaps five to ten distinctive yet complementary DLOs, where each DLO would complete the sentence: “As a result of our curriculum and their efforts, student completing our degree should be able to . . .”?*
- *Do we have sufficient student work opportunities within the curriculum to yield insight into how students are progressing in achieving these DLOs, which, in turn, will allow us to make informed changes intended to improve the engagement, success, and achievement of all students?*

Another approach to developing DLOs involves evidence-centered design as summarized by the figure below based on *How People Learn II* (2018)<sup>2</sup>. In this approach, DLOs develop within the *Claim Space* through collaborative discussions grounded in disciplinary standards and the local curriculum, which is also a source of information for exploring the complementary *Evidence* and *Task* components.



For many disciplines, the following *very generic* outcomes may provide a useful *starting place* for developing *more discipline-specific* and *detailed* DLOs:

- *Demonstrate knowledge of the fundamental concepts of the discipline*
- *Apply appropriate disciplinary skills to address discipline-specific and broader issues*
- *Communicate effectively within the discipline and to the broader public*
- *Conduct robust scholarly endeavors using discipline-specific methodologies and dispositions*

DLOs should be grounded in overt, concrete, and explicit transitive verbs (e.g., demonstrate, apply, communicate, conduct) versus more covert, abstract, and vague transitive verbs that may be difficult to assess (e.g., learn, understand, comprehend). Faculty might consider exploring Bloom’s Domains of Learning<sup>3</sup> as a useful heuristic for developing DLOs; the taxonomy for the most common cognitive domain is shown below and taken from LSU’s Center for Academic Success.

<sup>1</sup> SDSU uses the terms “Degree Learning Outcomes” and “Course Learning Outcomes (CLOs) to specific the curricular level of outcomes: CLOs identify expected student learning outcomes within a given course, whereas DLOs identify broader outcomes students should develop and demonstrate through their broader degree experience. Note that the use of “Degree Learning Outcome,” instead of “Program Learning Outcome,” is intentional given that a single academic unit may offer different degrees with different outcomes.

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.nap.edu/catalog/24783/how-people-learn-ii-learners-contexts-and-cultures>

<sup>3</sup> See, for example, summary at <https://www.astate.edu/dotAsset/7a3b152c-b73a-45d6-b8a3-7ecf7f786f6a.pdf>

A common faculty concern for a proposed DLO is that it is either too broad or too narrow. For a DLO considered overly broad, appreciate that it will typically be assessed through more specific Measures<sup>4</sup> that are grounded in student work within the curriculum and intentionally selected to yield local insight into student achievement with respect to that DLO.

Conversely, for a DLO considered overly specific, faculty might unpack what broader knowledge, skills, dispositions, etc. are “behind” this DLO and try to expand its breadth so it may be examined through a variety of different Measures across the broader curriculum.

Another common faculty concern is that any specific set of explicit DLOs will be too restrictive, reductionist, and/or prescriptive to capture the continuous developmental arc and holistic spirit of student learning and development. Such concerns often reflect a misconception about the intent of DLOs, which serve to (1) establish some shared priorities for student learning and development among faculty, (2) focus faculty attention on how students are doing with regards to these expectations, and (3) identify potential opportunities to improve the student experience.

Finally, note that a given DLO may well exist within multiple degrees offered by a given academic unit. However, if these degrees have essentially identical sets of DLOs, then questions may arise regarding degree distinctiveness and overlap. Similarly, degrees that include formal emphases can be differentiated by some emphasis-specific DLOs. Professional accreditation organizations may well prescribe certain learning outcomes; in such situations, faculty are encouraged to consider how such prescriptions might be tailored to reflect their academic unit’s mission, values, and distinctiveness.



<sup>4</sup> Measures are a key component in the assessment of DLOs and will be overview in a subsequent resource guide.