University of Wisconsin-Madison, Morgridge Center for Public Service[1]
Articulating and Assessing Student Learning in Community Based Learning Courses

These resources were designed to assist faculty in developing curriculum that encourages and assesses student learning in community-based learning courses.

While the major steps involved in developing curriculum and assessing student learning are outlined as distinct, the curriculum development process is iterative and cyclical--not strictly sequential; take what you need from each of these steps and return to them as you revise. For instance, while creating processes for evaluating student work through rubrics, you may find that the course's learning outcomes need to be further clarified or that the course activities could be redesigned to better meet those learning outcomes. Embrace this growth as we collectively improve teaching and learning!

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1. **Define clear and measurable learning outcomes.**
   a. Consider important situational factors. How many students will be in the course? How long and frequent are the class meetings? What experiences will students bring to the classroom and to their community work? How much energy and time will the community work consume? What are your experiences and knowledge, and how can you specifically support learning?
   b. Consider integrating experiences. *What kind of learning is common and essential to the classroom and community experiences involved with the course?*
   c. Look to the future. Along with considering the expectations being placed on this curriculum by your department or institution, consider what you'd like students to take away from the course in years to come. *What will they apply to their career and civic life beyond their community work or course term?*
   d. **Write learning outcomes and include them in the course syllabus.**
      i. See UW Madison's Essential Learning Outcomes.
      ii. Explore AACU's Learning Outcomes.
      iii. See examples of learning outcomes from UW-Madison CBL classes.

2. **Design activities that allow students to meet those learning outcomes.**
   a. Reflection often bridges community work with classroom or life experiences and is a common activity for CBL courses; see examples.
   b. Will students practice learning goals through multiple activities or just one outlet?
   c. Will students meet these learning goals primarily in the classroom, in community, through readings, during reflection?
   d. Are assignment prompts designed in a way that allow students to practice or demonstrate the course's intended learning outcomes?

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e. Explore resources for sequencing assignments from *Writing Across the Curriculum* at UW-Madison.
f. Have you accounted for the community work aspect of your students' work loads when designing activities (and assignments) for the course? Community work is not an "add on" to curriculum but is integral to the CBL experience. Bridging classroom and life experiences to community work through class activities and assignments is an important responsibility of CBL faculty.
g. Consider how students will integrate these experiences: do classroom activities strengthen community work (and vice versa) or do these activities foster fundamentally different kinds of learning?

3. **Find evidence that this learning is taking place.**
   a. What are the indicators of learning in student work? How do you know that the learning goals were met?
   b. Explore AACU's rubrics and feel welcome to adapt those rubrics to fit your assessment needs. Check out sample rubrics and criteria from *Writing Across the Curriculum* at UW-Madison.
   c. Will your assessment tools serve as methods for feedback to students? Will the feedback promote learning? How will you make the assessment useful to you and the student?
   d. Will your assessment tools need to be aligned with department or other campus wide instruments or reporting?

4. **Use the results to improve teaching and learning.**
   a. Changing learning goals or course activities to better meet the overall objectives of your program is a natural and important response to assessment. Using assessments to celebrate and continually strengthen those teaching strategies, partnerships, and processes that yield significant learning experiences for students is just as valuable.

Define Clear and Measurable Learning Outcomes for Community-Based Learning Courses

Identifying what students should be able to do and learn (learning outcomes) before determining specific course activities (assessments) is a key marker of the backwards design process. Learning outcomes state what students are expected to know or be able to do upon completion of the program. Learning outcomes should be clear and measurable. Start with an [action verb](#) that denotes the level of learning expected. Follow the verb with a statement describing the knowledge and abilities to be demonstrated.

Defining learning outcomes or goals requires considerable effort. If you're having trouble getting started, consider adopting or modifying learning goals that have been articulated by [others](#).

Techniques and considerations specific to community-based learning (CBL) courses:

- **Clearly state learning outcomes in the syllabus**. CBL courses can be a unique undertaking for students; providing clarity is a supportive act and might alleviate some uncertainty surrounding this (possibly new) endeavor. Many faculty list student learning outcomes near intended outcomes for the community partnership as part of the overall introduction to the course in the syllabus.
- **Determine what kind of learning is common and essential** to the classroom and community experiences involved with the course when brainstorming and prioritizing learning outcomes. Additionally, consider what type of learning you will want students to carry with them long after they've completed the course.
- **Consider the type of learning that will be unique to community sites** and, if appropriate, collaborate with community partners to design learning outcomes.
- **Communicate finalized learning outcomes with community partners** or supervisors at off-campus sites whenever possible; this demonstrates the value we place on the partnership to strengthen student learning and may ultimately support integration of experiences and learning for students.
- **Look ahead to how you might measure student learning off site**; by looking ahead to how you'll measure learning, your learning outcomes can be specific enough for students to observe their own growth as learners and set yourself up for success with rigorous but achievable outcomes.
- **Revise learning outcomes** based on previous terms, if applicable. What were students able to achieve that you hadn't considered or prioritized at the start of the course? If you don't want to revise learning outcomes, double check the activities you've designed to make sure you're meeting and celebrating the learning outcomes that are most important to your course.
- **Consider inviting students to co-create learning outcomes**; asking students to identify the nature of their learning celebrates their autonomy, honors difference in experience (especially at community sites), challenges students to articulate their learning, and represents the values inherent in community based learning courses, such as [sharing power](#). Often, activities intended to generate new learning outcomes can simultaneously support other learning outcomes you may have pre-established for the course, such as those pertaining to communication, collaboration, critical thinking, integrative learning, and reflection. If such an endeavor sounds intriguing but overwhelming, consider supporting students as they generate just one learning outcome for a particular assignment.
- **Remember that students can achieve the same overarching learning outcomes while having different experiences or articulating their learning in unique ways.** While some CBL faculty may find a single list of learning outcomes to be too restrictive or prescriptive, it doesn't mean that students can't finish the program having had significant or transformative learning influenced by their personal experiences, disciplinary perspective, identity, and differing levels of engagement with your coursework.

Additional frameworks, starting points, and resources:
[Assessment Resources through UW-Madison's Office of the Provost](#)
[Essential Learning Outcomes for Undergraduates at UW-Madison](#)
[Bloom's Taxonomy with Illustrative Verbs](#) - [Overview of Bloom's Revised Taxonomy](#)
[Fink's Taxonomy to Significant Learning](#) (See Fig 1, pg 9)
[American Association of Colleges and Universities VALUE Rubrics for 16 Learning Outcomes](#)

Designing Course Activities (Assessments) and Providing Feedback

After determining clear learning outcomes, design course activities (assessments) that contribute to those outcomes. If you're already teaching a course with assessments designed, take time to check in: **are the activities that you're assigning allowing students to cultivate and practice the learning outcomes you've identified for the course? How do you know?** At times, balancing the articulated needs of community partners with a clearly structured program of learning can feel overly idealistic; with careful reflection and framing, it is possible to prioritize both significant learning and mutually beneficial relationships with community partners.

FORMATIVE VS SUMMATIVE ASSESSMENT
Formative assessment is a process providing ongoing feedback that can be used by instructors to improve teaching and by students to improve learning. *Summative* assessment measures proficiencies obtained by the end of a unit or course, usually by comparing student work to a standard or benchmark. *Summative* assessment often has a greater emphasis on grading.

FORMATIVE ASSESSMENT
Formative assessment is often intertwined with *learning-centered* assessment or *educative* assessment, where even greater emphasis is placed on enhancing student learning by providing timely feedback, space for practice, and opportunities for adjustments before the end of a unit (Fink 2003). *Educative* and *formative* assessments are incredibly important in community-based learning courses, where student work in the community is time sensitive and may impact stakeholders beyond students and instructors. With a lesser focus on final grades, focusing on these formative course activities (assessments) may help alleviate the unique burdens of CBL students; through continuous feedback and improvement, students may feel empowered to thoughtfully integrate and conduct their community work, even through trial or uncertainty.

Principles of formative feedback. Facilitate the development of self-assessment and reflection in student learning, encourage teacher and peer dialogue around learning, help clarify what "good" performance is, provide opportunities for adjustment and revision, encourage self-esteem through low-stakes tasks before high-stakes tasks, and ask students to identify difficulties (Juwah et al 2004).

Consider forward-looking assessments. *Forward-looking* assessments anticipate what students might need or be able to use beyond the course. Incorporating exercises that reflect real-life situations, particularly crafted in relation to their community work, can help frame learning in a broader context of work-readiness and lifelong civic engagement.

Examples of formative assessments *(requires periodic feedback, space for adjustment, emphasis on practice, or usefulness in improving teaching):* Reflection journals or logs, paper outlines or drafts, self assessments, peer assessments, minute papers or exit cards (in-class prompt to assess understanding), posting discussion questions, concept maps or graffiti walls (making connections and interpretations of a unit), in-class observations of engagement, written or oral problem solving, questioning (to get beyond surface level understanding), repeat pre-assessments, think-pair-share, drafting questions for guest speakers, homework exercises as review, class case studies, conferences between instructor or TA and student.

SUMMATIVE ASSESSMENT

Summative assessment is given after a unit or course has been completed and provides information about what learning has taken place. Grades are usually given following criteria in *summative* assessments; while these assessments are usually oriented toward final projects and are less process-oriented, *summative* assessments can still be crafted to be *forward-looking* and can still provide feedback to students about their performance.

Summative assessments in community-based learning courses:
While final exams are common to many courses, other types of *summative* assessments may be particularly useful for students and community partners involved in a CBL course, such as: final reflection papers, group and/or community-based projects, portfolios integrating course and community work, presentations and performances celebrating course and community work, case studies, or delivery of culminating products or services to community partners. Discipline-specific culminating projects can provide practice for workplace tasks while applying what has been learned throughout the term. Projects requiring students to provide a product, resource, or service to community partners or clients, such as in capstone courses, can be some of the highest-stakes and highest-reward assessments; be sure to provide ample support so that students and community partners genuinely benefit from these projects and efforts.

DIRECT AND INDIRECT MEASURES
Student learning can be measured using a variety of methods. While crafting assessments of your course or program, consider whether direct or indirect measures of student learning will be appropriate. *Direct* measures assess student performance by reviewing actual samples of student work and include most of the formative and summative assessments described above, often benefiting from rubrics, checklists, and formal evaluations. *Indirect* measures call on opinions or thoughts about teaching and learning through focus groups, alumni surveys, community partner surveys, employer surveys, course evaluations, and self assessments (although some self assessments can be used as direct measures of student learning by providing space for students to reflect and practice articulating their knowledge). *Indirect* measures may further inform or substantiate findings from *direct* measures.

Indirect measures and community partner check-ins. Check-ins with community partners are commonly utilized indirect measures of student performance in community-based learning courses. Try not to burden community partners with too many check-ins, but provide a structure for open communication. Sending partners 2-3 questions via email in the middle and at the end of the semester is a common practice. ***Don't have the time, aren't sure what to ask, or afraid that partners may not feel comfortable sharing with you?*** Reach out to the Morgridge Center for Public Service to receive support from a community-based learning fellow who can work with you to gather this feedback from partners. (LINK TO CBL FELLOWS)

Direct measures and rubrics. When closely fit to course content, disciplinary language, and clear learning outcomes, rubrics can be a useful tool in measuring student learning directly. While rubrics may feel sterile and unflinching, they establish expectations for students and provide a map for deep learning. Remember to pull from or elaborate on your course learning outcomes when writing expectations and criteria on rubrics. Not sure where to start? Consider adapting AAC&U's rubrics for essential learning outcomes to fit your course content and expectations. While not all students will demonstrate their learning in the same way, rubrics provide tools for finding evidence of student learning.

Tips on Rubrics (and Making it Easier to Find Evidence of Student Learning)

- **Develop rubrics from scratch or adapt pre-existing rubrics** from sources such as [AAC&U VALUE rubrics](#) or [sample rubrics and criteria](#) from *Writing Across the Curriculum* at UW-Madison in order to reinforce or clarify expectations to students; it's perfectly acceptable to adjust rubrics subtly or dramatically in order to fit your disciplinary needs!
- **Show rubrics to students when assigning coursework or during revision stages.** Sharing rubrics at the start of an assignment establishes clear expectations. However, a rubric can sometimes be intimidating for students at early stages of an assignment. **You may have success providing low-stakes in-progress rubrics** to students when they turn in drafts of an assignment or while they're working on large projects; provide a version of the rubric with learning outcomes that are consistent with the assignment expectations and course outcomes, leave room for students to assess the work along those specific criteria, leave room for instructor feedback, and forego grading at this stage. For finalized projects, provide a slightly updated rubric that includes room for self-scoring and instructor scoring alongside qualitative self-assessment and instructor feedback. This promotes educative formative assessments that lead into meaningful summative assessments.
- **Use student-friendly language**. Will students understand what instructors expect them to do? For example, you may even consider writing learning outcomes from the perspective of the student with, *"I can select and use multiple sources to thoroughly investigate or question the point of view of an expert."*
- **Be specific and descriptive.** Many students struggle with ambiguity. Specificity helps instructors find evidence of the learning in artifacts such as presentations and papers; description helps students envision possible responses to the assignment prompts. While this can feel like a limitation to transformative learning or creative problem solving, students will be able to demonstrate their learning in unique and diverse ways based on their personal, work, and community experiences.
- **Yes, leave room for creativity.** Design learning outcomes in a way that allows students to express divergent or imaginative viewpoints. Emphasize that assignments are not simply for meeting expectations but for utilizing a specific framework to share new information or reflections. Learning outcomes are generally foundational skills or content that can and should be expanded on based on application in community settings, interdisciplinary perspectives, and culturally diverse experiences.
- **Use parallel language**, making sure that terms from column to column are similar and correspond, particularly in relation to the performance indicators instructors expect to see in student work. For example, if the overarching learning outcome is to *"select and use multiple sources to investigate or question the point of view of an expert"* one benchmark may describe that students *"take viewpoints of experts as mostly fact with little questioning"* while a more advanced benchmark may describe that students *"thoroughly question viewpoints of experts."*
- **Use common rubrics and templates.** Once you've formatted in-progress rubrics and final rubrics, plugging different learning outcomes or expectations into the template for different assignments will save you time while reducing rubric fatigue. Common formats for feedback and grading throughout the term, through use of rubrics, will also establish reliable routines for improving teaching and learning.
- **Emphasize feedback that promotes learning.** Giving constructive feedback to "incorrect" answers on assignments that depend on demonstrating specific disciplinary knowledge can be difficult. Use rubrics as a tool for providing corrective or educative feedback so that students can find the "correct" answers. Do this, too, for integrative, reflection-based assignments, which may have more shades of grey in their responses but are still missing benchmarks for intended learning outcomes. Emphasizing positive feedback helps to sustain student motivation to continuously revise and learn.
- **Consider inviting students to edit rubrics.** If there is energy and time, consider asking students how they would clarify or revise the rubric. This process may better articulate expectations, increase investment and understanding in the tool, and increase capacity for educative and meaningful assessments.

Use Results to Improve Teaching and Learning

- What are the most valuable insights gained from the assessments?
- What are the most important conclusions?
- Were there patterns in what students were or weren't able to accomplish, individually or collectively, throughout the term? Were certain learning outcomes more or less difficult to meet than others for multiple students?
- What strengths/weaknesses in learning were indicated?
- Were there any observable but unintended learning outcomes? Should this be incorporated as a formal learning outcome to cultivate and practice in the future?
- In the context of learning outcomes, could you observe change or growth in students? How did you find evidence of growth, change, or learning? Did you know or ask what knowledge or skills students came into the course with or what they learned from other classes? How do you know which skills they gained, fully or in part, due to prompts and assessments in your program's curriculum?
- How can teaching or learning be enhanced?
- Did the assessment process yield improved demonstration of knowledge and skills throughout the term? Were formative assessments useful in yielding meaningful summative assessments?
- Were the assessments appropriately matched or integrated with course content and community projects, or did they feel like add-ons to the work load?
- As an instructor, did you feel motivated to engage with the feedback process?
- Did students demonstrate motivation to revise throughout formative assessment processes?
- Were assessments easily implemented? What improvements could have been made?
- What should change about the assessment process?
- How did assessments influence performance in community projects? How do you know?
- Can any results of your assessments be shared with your program or department?