

The Council on Accreditation of Park, Recreation, Tourism, and Related Professions

*2013 Standards: The Importance of Outcome-Based Assessment
and the Connection to Student Learning*

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Abstract

The Council for Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA) adopted recognition standards in 2006 requiring regional and professional accreditors such as the Council on Accreditation of Park, Recreation, Tourism, and Related Professions (COAPRT) to adopt standards and practices advancing academic quality, demonstrating accountability, and encouraging self-scrutiny and planning for change and improvement. COAPRT complied by replacing 45 content-based academic standards with four broad learning outcomes. Programs have flexibility when addressing these outcomes, but must demonstrate opportunities for students to obtain appropriate knowledge and skills, assess student performance, determine whether assessments indicate student achievement at desired levels, and evidence assessment driving curricular decision making. Other new standards require programs to make assessment results available to the public. The process by which COAPRT developed, tested, assessed, revised, and implemented the new standards between 2004 and 2013 is discussed. COAPRT's continuing CHEA recognition is dependent upon implementation of and program compliance with these new standards.

Keywords: *accreditation; standards; learning outcomes; assessment*

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Members of the Council on Accreditation of Park, Recreation, Tourism, and Related Professions (COAPRT) became aware in 2004 of a fundamental shift in the paradigm guiding regional and professional higher education accreditation; one requiring assessment of student learning outcomes. Heretofore, COAPRT conducted process-oriented reviews of academic programs, amounting to little more than a checklist approach. Under this system, site visitors and the Council, utilized 45 standards and substandards to determine whether all students in a park and recreation degree program received required content. Course syllabi were reviewed, faculty consulted, and students queried for verification that students were provided with the requisite content. Absent from self-studies, visitors' reports, and the Council's deliberations, were any analyses of the *quality* of instruction or determinations as to whether students' were achieving the levels of understanding and/or application consistent with quality pre-professional preparation. Such cursory reviews left COAPRT far short of achieving its mission of "...ensuring that those enrolled in accredited programs are provided a quality education that empowers them to succeed in parks, recreation, tourism, and related specialization professions." (COAPRT, 2013, p. 6).

Spurred on by educational reform movements such as "No Child Left Behind," and calls for greater accountability, the Council for Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA) made the assessment of student learning outcomes the cornerstone of regional and professional accreditation. CHEA, "A national advocate and institutional voice for self-regulation of academic quality through accreditation..." (2012, p. 1) and its predecessor, the Council on Postsecondary Accreditation, have recognized COAPRT since 1986. CHEA adheres to seven foundational principles, the foremost being quality assurance: "CHEA will apply its recognition standards and sustain ongoing review of its participating accrediting organizations to assure a high quality of organizational performance" (p. 2). This emphasis on high quality is reflected in four (**in bold**) of the six CHEA recognition standards promoting quality through assessment. COAPRT accredited programs should be aware that COAPRT's CHEA recognition requires conformance with these recognition standards:

- **Advance academic quality.** Accreditors have a clear description of academic quality and clear expectations that the institutions or programs they accredit have processes to determine whether quality standards are being met.
- **Demonstrate accountability.** Accreditors have standards that call for institutions and programs to provide consistent, reliable information about academic quality and student achievement to foster continuing public confidence and investment.
- **Encourage, where appropriate, self scrutiny and planning for change and needed improvement.** Accreditors encourage self scrutiny for change and needed improvement through ongoing self-examination in institutions and programs.
- **Employ appropriate and fair procedures in decision making.** Accreditors maintain appropriate and fair organizational policies and procedures that include effective checks and balances.
- **Demonstrate ongoing review of accreditation practice.** Accreditors undertake self scrutiny of their accrediting activities.
- **Possess sufficient resources.** Accreditors have and maintain predictable and stable resources. (CHEA, 2012, p. 2).

Therefore, in order to retain CHEA recognition, COAPRT is required to undertake systematic reviews of academic programs' student learning outcomes and determine

whether the submitted evidence supports findings of learning outcomes achievement (CHEA, 2010, p.5). This was the driving force behind the development and implementation of the 2013 outcome-based standards.

Neither CHEA, the regional accrediting bodies, nor COAPRT endeavors to set specific student learning outcomes. Rather, institutions and programs are given latitude to craft outcomes and assessment measures specific to their respective missions. In keeping with this principle, COAPRT established four broad learning outcomes allowing programs to address them holistically or to develop a range of program- or course-specific learning outcomes addressing each standard.

Whereas earlier COAPRT accreditation standards were content prescriptive, the absence of such direction, coupled with this new latitude for individuation, has led programs to seek guidance as to what learning outcomes and self-study format COAPRT expects. With respect to learning outcomes, COAPRT is unable to provide prescriptive direction because learning outcomes are now expected to be aligned with institutional and program missions. Therefore, learning outcomes and their assessment, vary in keeping with each program's culture and practices.

There are models available. A number of resources in print, online, and through an institution's assessment coordinator are available for use in the development of student learning outcomes and their assessment. Often cited among these resources are the results of a 1992 American Association for Higher Education forum on best practices for assessing student learning (American Association for Higher Education Assessment Forum, p. 9). Readers of this document will find comprehensive explanations of the following nine principles of assessment:

- The assessment of student learning begins with educational values;
- Assessment is most effective when it reflects an understanding of learning as multidimensional, integrated, and revealed in performance over time;
- Assessment works best when the programs it seeks to improve have clear, explicitly stated purposes;
- Assessment requires attention to outcomes but also and equally to the experiences that lead to those outcomes;
- Assessment works best when it is ongoing not episodic;
- Assessment fosters wider improvement when representatives from across the educational community are involved;
- Assessment makes a difference when it begins with issues of use and illuminates questions that people really care about;
- Assessment is most likely to lead to improvement when it is part of a larger set of conditions that promote change; and,
- Through assessment, educators meet responsibilities to students and to the public.

A thorough review of the connections between assessment and student learning can be found in *Committing to Quality: Guidelines for Assessment and Accountability in Higher Education*, a 2012 publication from the New Leadership Alliance for Student Learning and Accountability. Seven points illustrate how learning outcome development and assessment benefit the program and enhance student learning. First, developing learning outcome statements help faculty identify, and students understand, what they should know and be able

to demonstrate when they graduate. Second, consistencies in learning outcomes between programs that are evaluated against external benchmarks, such as accreditation, permit data-driven comparisons. Third, well-developed learning outcomes can aid programs in their search for curricular and co-curricular activities better achieving student success. Fourth, publishing and posting learning outcomes in actual and virtual locations helps students, parents, and other stakeholders understand the program focus. Fifth, appropriate gathering and use of evidence of student learning is a powerful tool in the assurance of program quality as well as informing improvements. Sixth, “Reporting evidence and results of student learning to both internal and external constituents strengthens the institution’s commitment to improving programs and services that contribute to a high level of student accomplishment” (p. 8). Finally, posting assessment results and other program indicators in a highly visible and easily accessible location, such as on the program’s website, creates a level of transparency and accountability leading to greater stakeholder confidence.

In 2003, CHEA issued the “Statement of Mutual Responsibilities for Student Learning Outcomes: Accreditation, Institutions, and Programs,” placing all CHEA recognized accrediting bodies on notice that assessment of student learning outcomes was to become integral in all accreditation policies and procedures. Going forward, accrediting organizations were to establish standards requiring programs to define student learning outcomes, collect and interpret learning outcome assessment data, and explain how the results were used to drive programmatic changes. These data were to be supplemented with other indices of effective program performance, such as retention and graduation rates, job placement, or graduate school admission. Furthermore, evidence of students’ learning outcome achievements was to be publicly available, enabling stakeholders to determine program effectiveness. COAPRT responded by adopting a strategy to develop, pilot test, revise, and adopt new learning-outcome-based standards by January 1, 2013.

Between 2005 and 2007, the Council members identified student learning outcomes through consultation with educators, professionals, and other stakeholders. Early attempts resulted in outcomes somewhat less prescriptive than previous standards but they provided limited opportunities, or direction, for programs to craft program-specific learning outcomes. Input on the first publicly available set of standards was sought between September 1 and December 1, 2007, with several public forums being held at the National Recreation and Park Association Congress. Second and third revisions were available on January 15 and May 1, 2008 respectively. A beta test (see Ellis) was conducted in September, 2008 and new training materials for programs and visitors were developed subsequently. Next, the standards were pilot tested among a small set of programs chosen for size, geographic location, and institutional or program mission starting in the 2009-10 academic year. A set of frequently asked questions (FAQs) was developed and revised as conditions indicated. The FAQs remain available on COAPRT’s website at http://www.nrpa.org/uploadedFiles/nrpa.org/Professional_Development/Accreditation/COAPRT/2013%20Standards%20FAQIII_January%202010.pdf. The four pilot schools were SUNY–Cortland, Arkansas Tech University, California State University Chico, and Ithaca College. Additionally, a few programs opted to undergo reaccreditation using various versions of the new standards. Their efforts were instrumental in the Council’s finalization of the learning outcome standards in November 2012 and subsequent adoption effective January 1, 2013. The standards underwent additional revisions in January and April 2013 to address CHEA compliance issues unrelated to the learning outcome standards.

The learning outcome standards adopted on January 1, 2013 consist of three content areas: foundational knowledge, service delivery, and operations and strategic management/administration, with the fourth requiring an internship.

7.01 Students graduating from the program shall demonstrate the following entry-level knowledge: a) the nature and scope of the relevant park, recreation, tourism, or related professions and their associated industries; b) techniques and processes used by professionals and workers in these industries; and c) the foundation of the profession in history, science, and philosophy.

7.02 Students graduating from the program shall be able to demonstrate the ability to design, implement, and evaluate services that facilitate targeted human experiences and that embrace personal and cultural dimensions of diversity.

7.03 Students graduating from the program shall be able to demonstrate entry-level knowledge about operations and strategic management/administration in parks, recreation, tourism and/or related professions.

7.04 Students graduating from the program shall demonstrate, through a comprehensive internship of not less than 400 clock hours and no fewer than 10 weeks, the potential to succeed as professionals at supervisory or higher levels in park, recreation, tourism, or related organizations.

Each of the learning outcomes is evaluated on four criteria. The X denotes which standard, 7.01 through 7.04, under consideration.

7.0X.01 The program shall demonstrate that students are provided with sufficient opportunity to achieve this learning outcome.

7.0X.02 The program shall demonstrate that quality assessment measures were used to assess learning outcomes associated with this standard.

7.0X.03 The program shall demonstrate that results of its assessment program indicate that graduates of the program are achieving this learning outcome.

7.0X.04 The program shall demonstrate that it uses data from assessment of Learning Outcome 7.0X for continuous program improvement.

Evaluative criteria are accompanied by suggestions of documentation that may be submitted as evidence of learning opportunities, assessment measures, data, and the use of assessment. These criteria reflect CHEA's statement of mutual responsibility (2003) that COAPRT establish clear expectations that institutions and programs will routinely define, collect, interpret, and use evidence of student learning outcomes.

Following the pilot tests and reaccreditation visitations at programs independently adopting the new standards, the Council determined that programs were still uncertain as to how to best develop learning outcomes, assessment strategies, and report results that were reflective of the program mission, identity, and culture. Thus, a template was developed (see Table 1) to illustrate how programs might proceed and present information on course- or program-specific learning outcomes in the self-study.

Should a program choose to adopt this approach, the template identifies the COAPRT learning outcome at the top of each section. The column headings provide a space for the program to identify course-specific learning outcomes. Alternatively, a program-wide learning outcome could be entered providing the cells in the other six cells on the row can be addressed. The column labeled “COAPRT Learning Outcome” provides space for the program to target the learning outcome to a specific element within the broader COAPRT learning outcome statement.

“Evidence of Learning Opportunity” refers to course content, readings, assignments, or other activities through which students receive the learning necessary to achieve the outcome. “Performance Measure” requires a description of the assessment instrument employed by the program to generate data on student learning. Additionally, programs are expected to provide information on the validity and reliability of the instrument. “Performance levels/metrics” refers to indices established by the program to determine whether students have achieved the outcome successfully. For example, several programs have adopted a percent-of-students-achieving-a-percent-of-results approach (e.g., 80% of the students will score 75% or higher on the assessment). The column “Assessment results” provides a space to record the results consistent with the performance level/metric. Finally, programs are required to indicate in the column labeled “Evidence of Programmatic Decision” what documentation may be reviewed to show how faculty have used the assessment results to verify effectiveness of current practices or institute appropriate changes to improve student learning in accordance with the outcomes. The final column is for visitation team use, providing a space to record an evaluation of the learning outcome. Visitors’ analysis of the evidence provided or referenced in each of the cells results in the assignment of one of four evaluative terms for each learning outcome: Absent, Emerging, Present, or Outstanding. An evaluation of “Absent” is the result of a program lacking learning outcome statements related to the COAPRT standard, few or no opportunities for students to acquire the requisite knowledge, or inappropriate performance measures and levels/metrics. Programs providing satisfactory evidence for the first five cells in the row, but have not collected and/or analyzed data, would be assigned “Emerging.” Those programs providing evidence for all cells in a row, but having some level of deficiency in one, such as a mischaracterization of the validity or reliability of a performance measure or only one or two data collection cycles, would likely receive a “Present.” Evaluations of “Outstanding” are reserved for learning outcomes evidencing very comprehensive and continuous assessment efforts. The Council recognizes that programs are at different stages in adopting learning outcomes assessment and seeks to advance their efforts through constructive evaluation. As long as programs embrace learning outcomes assessment and evidence progress toward full, robust, and consistent implementation, they are unlikely to be subject to disciplinary action.

As noted above, programs may adopt the approach presented in Table 1 or they can choose to develop a reporting mechanism better suited to their program. Some programs may choose to adopt program-wide learning outcomes that are broader in scope and require students to access multiple learning opportunities. Likewise, assessment measures may cover multiple learning outcomes (e.g., an exit examination or internship skills evaluation). The challenge for each program is to clearly illustrate the link between their learning outcomes and the COAPRT standards. Additionally, the program must present evidence of student learning opportunities, performance measures and levels/metrics, assessment results, and programmatic decisions in a systematic and logical format that is easily accessed by visitors and COAPRT evaluators.

Table 1
Learning Outcomes Template

7.01 Students graduating from the program shall demonstrate the following entry-level knowledge: a) the nature and scope of the relevant park, recreation, tourism or related professions and their associated industries; b) techniques and processes used by professionals and workers in these industries; and c) the foundation of the profession in history, science and philosophy.							
Course Specific Learning Outcome	COPART Learning Outcome	Evidence of Learning Opportunity	Performance Measure	Performance levels/metrics	Assessment Results	Evidence of Programmatic Decisions	This column for use of visitors only
							<input type="checkbox"/> ABSENT
							<input type="checkbox"/> EMERGING
							<input type="checkbox"/> PRESENT
							<input type="checkbox"/> OUTSTANDING
7.02 Students graduating from the program shall be able to demonstrate the ability to design, implement, and evaluate services that facilitate targeted human experiences and that embrace personal and cultural dimensions of diversity.							
Course Specific Learning Outcome	COPART Learning Outcome	Evidence of Learning Opportunity	Performance Measure	Performance levels/metrics	Assessment Results	Evidence of Programmatic Decisions	This column for use of visitors only
							<input type="checkbox"/> ABSENT
							<input type="checkbox"/> EMERGING
							<input type="checkbox"/> PRESENT
							<input type="checkbox"/> OUTSTANDING
7.03 Students graduating from the program shall be able to demonstrate entry-level knowledge about operations and strategic management/administration in parks, recreation, tourism and/or related professions.							
Course Specific Learning Outcome	COPART Learning Outcome	Evidence of Learning Opportunity	Performance Measure	Performance levels/metrics	Assessment Results	Evidence of Programmatic Decisions	This column for use of visitors only
							<input type="checkbox"/> ABSENT
							<input type="checkbox"/> EMERGING
							<input type="checkbox"/> PRESENT
							<input type="checkbox"/> OUTSTANDING
7.04 Students graduating from the program shall demonstrate, through a comprehensive internship of not less than 400 clock hours and no fewer than 10 weeks, the potential to succeed as professionals at supervisory or higher levels in park, recreation, tourism, or related organizations.							
Course Specific Learning Outcome	COPART Learning Outcome	Evidence of Learning Opportunity	Performance Measure	Performance levels/metrics	Assessment Results	Evidence of Programmatic Decisions	This column for use of visitors only
							<input type="checkbox"/> ABSENT
							<input type="checkbox"/> EMERGING
							<input type="checkbox"/> PRESENT
							<input type="checkbox"/> OUTSTANDING

Consistent with CHEA (2003) and COAPRT expectations, programs are required to gather and report learning outcomes assessment on a regular basis, as well as making the results publicly accessible on their websites. The COAPRT annual report now includes items specifically addressing these requirements. Furthermore, the Council has adopted procedures for systematic review of each annual report and discussion by the full Council should the review so indicate. As a result of COAPRT's most recent CHEA recognition hearing (June 2013), the Council has been granted a one-year extension to provide evidence that programs are making assessment results publicly accessible and that the Council is monitoring and evaluating their assessment efforts. Program compliance with COAPRT standards and reporting requirements, along with diligent Council oversight, are critical for continued CHEA recognition.

CHEA recognition bestows on COAPRT the rights and privileges necessary to serve as the accrediting body for undergraduate academic programs in parks, recreation, tourism, and related professions. Absent a CHEA recognized COAPRT, programs will no longer have an accrediting body assuring they are rigorously and consistently reviewed according to timely and relevant standards that result in self scrutiny and continual program improvement, including better integration of learning opportunities with desired outcomes.

Spurred on by regional and professional accrediting bodies, universities have established the development of student learning outcomes and their assessment as faculty expectations. These are expectations that can no longer be deferred or ignored. More importantly, the value of learning-outcomes assessment is significant. Assessment results help faculty identify what students are not learning or having difficulty mastering. Results may lead to inquiries about whether instructional practices are suitable for outcomes and spur faculty to consider approaches better tapping into students' study and success habits. For example, students' increasing reliance on social connectivity, may suggest an instructional strategy employing problem-based learning in group settings. The growth of peer reviewed Scholarship on Teaching and Learning (SoTL) literature provides many evidence-based ideas for improving student learning. Furthermore, learning assessment results may identify misalignments between the course content and the intended learning outcomes. Whereas earlier COAPRT standards resulted in faculty asking, "In which class is this content taught?" the question has now become, "Is this the right place or way (course presentation, readings, assignments, experiences) for students to receive the required content for this outcome?"

Those serving over the past decade on the Council on Accreditation of Park, Recreation, Tourism and Related Professions have endeavored to craft standards, policies, and procedures designed to guide and assist programs as they make the transition to learning-outcomes assessment, while assuring that each accredited program holds true to the institutional mission, as well as its own mission and unique culture. Under the 2013 Standards, students, their parents or sponsors, academic administrators, prospective employers, alumni, and other stakeholders are provided with valuable indices of student performance and program quality.

In a bygone era, anecdotal evidence of student success sufficed; this graduate attaining a significant entry-level position, that alumna earning her master's or doctorate, or another promoted to the highest leadership level. Unknown was whether students in general were receiving an education preparing them with essential knowledge, skills, and abilities; one based on clearly stated learning outcomes, appropriate learning opportunities, and assessment-based evidence that the learning facilitates the desired outcomes. All students

deserve a quality educational experience, whether they enter the field in a significant position, go on to complete post-graduate degrees, become a professional super star, or lead lives of meaning and worth in other ways. Curricula crafted around valued learning outcomes that are subjected to rigorous internal assessment and seek comprehensive external review through accreditation, distinguish themselves as having placed student learning and achievement as their foremost obligation.

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