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Debi Lang

University of Massachusetts Medical School

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The Importance of Learning Objectives in Program Design and Evaluation

Hello from **Debi Lang** with the [Massachusetts Area Health Education Center Network](#) (MassAHEC) at the University of Massachusetts Medical School's [Center for Health Policy and Research](#). I last published an [aea365 post](#) on how evaluation and program staff collaborated to establish a competency-based model for a range of MassAHEC Health Careers Promotion and Preparation (HCPP) programs. The current post focuses on the importance of learning objectives as part of program design and evaluation, with some tips and resources on how to write clear objectives.

The AHEC HCPP model consists of 5 **core competencies** with **learning goals** that apply across a range of HCPP programs (see the chart below).

Core Competencies		Learning Goals
CC 1	The Health Care System	Students will understand the connection between patients, providers, insurers, and government in the U.S. health care system. They will consider the impact of social determinants and health disparities.
CC 2	Personal Health & Healthy Lifestyles	Students will consider the impact of personal lifestyle choices on one's own health, future education and career opportunities
CC 3	Health Career Exploration	Students will broaden their understanding of various health careers options including, but not limited to, those in primary care and public health, as well as how practitioners in various health fields deliver inter-professional collaborative care.
CC 4	Leadership Development	Students will display a positive attitude and contribute to a more socially responsible community through team work and service learning
CC 5	Education and Career Planning	Students will demonstrate readiness to work and/or pursue further education and training in the healthcare field.

Each of the programs has written learning objectives that define specific knowledge, skills, and attitudes students will learn by participating in these programs. Learning objectives are important because they:

- document the knowledge, skills, attitudes/behaviors students should be able to demonstrate after completing the program;
- encourage good program design by guiding the use of appropriate class activities, materials, and assessments;
- tell students what they can expect to learn/become competent in by participating in the program; and
- help measure students' learning.

Below are some of the learning objectives from one HCPP program and their connection to the competencies listed above:

COMPETENCY	CC1 The Health Care System	CC2 Personal Health & Health Lifestyles	CC3 Health Career Exploration	CC4 Leadership Development	CC5 Education and Career Planning
OBJECTIVE Students will:	Define the concept of health equity	Describe two strategies to maintain healthy body weight	Identify three types of health professionals that practice primary care	Plan and deliver an oral presentation on a public health topic	Identify the educational pathway for 3-5 health professions

Hot Tips: Here are some recommendations for writing learning objectives.

- Think of learning objectives as outcomes. What will students know/be able to do once they complete the program? Start with the phrase: "At the end of this program, students will..."
- Be careful not to write learning objectives as a description of the activities or tasks students will experience during the program.
- Make sure student learning assessments are based on the learning objectives.

Rad Resource: “[Bloom’s Taxonomy](#)” is a framework based on 6 levels of knowledge (cognition) that progress from simple to more complex. When writing learning objectives, use the keywords associated with the knowledge level you expect students to achieve.

To be continued...

Program-specific learning objectives that connect to one or more core competencies can help measure student learning in order to report program outcomes from a competency perspective on a local and state level. In a future post, I’ll discuss how learning objectives are used in an evaluation method called the retrospective pre-post, along with ways to analyze data collected using this design feature.