Best Practices - Developing meaningful, realistic, and measurable outcomes for nonacademic services

1. What is an outcome at Prince George’s Community College?

An outcome is a statement that defines expected benefits or changes in our student population or in our capacity as an institution to transform students’ lives (see United Way, adapted by Weiss, 2007). There are two key components in this definition:

- The statement includes an explicit end result that we want to achieve (Bresciani, 2006).
- The end result has to do with improvement, but not just any kind of improvement. The statement defines expected improvements which would directly or indirectly help transform students’ lives.

2. How do we know if an outcome is meaningful, realistic, and measurable?

- An outcome is meaningful when achieving that outcome would contribute to fulfilling the College’s mission (Bresciani, 2001). This is clearly the case when an outcome refers to improvements in student learning, student achievement, or the student experience. For example, “Increase the number of students that transition from non-credit to credit by 15%.”

  But sometimes, proposed outcomes do not specify direct changes or benefits for our students. Instead, they involve expected gains in resources, opportunities, productivity, or efficiency for specific units. In such cases, we need to ask how such improvements would help transform students’ lives. If we cannot find any relevant evidence or offer a feasible explanation on how students would benefit, it may be best to reformulate the outcome or replace it with another outcome.

- An outcome is measurable when it is possible to “provide evidence that the outcome was or was not achieved” (Bresciani, 2001). This requires deciding in advance what evidence will be used and how that evidence will be gathered. It is also necessary to set an expected level improvement, e.g., by how much something is expected to improve (see Martin, 2013). For example, “Decrease the number of times students have to be called back by 20%.”

- An outcome is realistic when it makes sense in light of existing data. To develop realistic outcomes, it is important to establish a baseline or initial measurement against which to compare future performance. It is also important to consider whether performance has been improving, declining, or remaining stagnant over time (Martin, 2013). The process of developing realistic outcomes often entails examining data from our peer institutions as well as from our aspirational peers, e.g., institutions with similar characteristics (mission, size, demographics, etc.) but better performance on relevant metrics.
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3. What is not an outcome? Outcomes versus activities and outputs

- Outcomes are different from activities. Implementing or completing an activity or an intervention, such as “Implement an Enterprise Identity Management System,” is not the same as achieving an outcome. A first test to determine whether a statement is or isn’t an outcome involves asking whether it is possible to measure the outcome other than by stating ‘Yes’ or ‘No’, “We did this’ or ‘We didn’t do that’? (Martin, 2013). If it’s not possible to conduct further measurement, then the statement is not an outcome.

- Outcomes are also different from outputs. Outputs are the concrete products or services generated by the completion of an activity, a program, or an intervention. For instance, the number of program participants, the number of workshops facilitated, or the number of brochures printed are examples of outputs (Rincones-Gómez, 2009).

- Outputs can be measurable, but they are “intermediate steps” rather than the “desired end result” we want to achieve (Martin, 2013). Suppose, for example, that a college has conducted diversity training for its staff. The number of employees trained would not be an outcome. Instead, an outcome could be “Increase the percentage of employees who feel comfortable interacting with people from different backgrounds by 10%.” Outcomes should state the expected impact of our interventions; they should provide us with answers to the question “Why are we doing this?” (Martin, 2013).

4. How do we measure outcomes?

- When deciding how to measure an outcome, it is important to consider the size of the target population. Take, for example, the outcome “Reduce complaints by 30% in the next three years” set by Administrative Services. In this case, it is important to determine who the users of Administrative Services are. The measurement should cover a significant proportion of users, not just a small minority.

- Additionally, it is necessary to consider the scope of the activity, intervention, or area being assessed. If, for example, a student orientation program is conducted face-to-face and online, the program outcomes should be measured for both modalities.

- Ideally, more than one measurement method and, if possible, both direct and indirect methods should be used (Bresciani, 2006). Direct methods involve counts, tracking, or actual demonstrations of performance. Indirect methods involve self-reported data such as perceptions, views, and opinions expressed in the context of surveys or focus groups.