

OFFICE OF INSTITUTIONAL EFFECTIVENESS AND ASSESSMENT

ASSESSMENT OF ADMINISTRATIVE AND EDUCATIONAL SUPPORT UNITS

Primary Methodological Issues with Assessment Methods and Performance Targets and Their Solutions

There are a number of persistent problems reflected in the assessment plans for administrative and educational support units and which the Office of Institutional Effectiveness and Assessment offer solutions in this document. While the use of goals as objectives and lack of metric measures seem to be two most common issues, there are other important obstacles to well-developed assessment plans and methodologies. This brief paper provides guidance to divisions/units in their efforts to avoid methodological problems with assessment approaches. The key code used in the assessment scorecard provides an organizational scheme for the solutions below.

Section Focusing on NSO

Distinguishing Unit Goals from Objectives

NSO: The **Non-specific Objective/Outcome** error is commonly reflected in assessment plans in terms of the lack of distinction made between unit goals and objectives.

Goals are broader/general assertions that describe the overarching long-term intended objectives of an administrative or educational support unit. Goals may not be measurable and usually need to be further developed as separate/distinct objectives, that when measured appropriately, provide evidence of how well you are accomplishing your goals.

Objectives, on the other hand, are measurable statements that describe the expected or intended quality relative to timeliness, responsiveness, accuracy, etc.

Learning Outcomes, defined in the context of educational support/service units, are measurable statements that describe the expected knowledge and/or understanding of concepts, etc. Educational support/service units such as those within the Division of Student Affairs or the Library may derive student learning outcomes from their goals as they usually aim at increasing students' knowledge/understanding of concepts or operations within the division/unit.

Examples of unit objectives: The examples below are from different USF assessment plans – names or references to units have been removed):

Objective (NSO Example): *Improve student services.*

The example above provides an adequate learning goal, but it is too general a statement to be considered an adequate objective. Contrast this example with the two below.

NSO Solution: Make sure that the intended objective is stated in measurable terms and that it reflects the mission and goals of the unit. Below are examples of Acceptable (AC) intended objectives:

- i. *Create a central support group to administer the email system. The central support group will facilitate expanded hours of support and provide for depth of expertise in administering this critical system.*
- ii. *Increase the quality of distance learning instruction at USF by means of a year-long institute for faculty to help them increase their expertise in the use of instructional technology for distance learning.*

Examples of unit learning outcomes: The examples below are from different USF assessment plans – names or references to units have been removed):

Learning Outcome (NSO Example): *Faculty will learn to use the library.*

The example above provides an adequate learning goal, but it is too general a statement to be considered an adequate learning outcome. Contrast this example with the two below.

NSO Solution: Make sure that the intended learning outcome is stated in measurable terms and that it reflects the mission and goals of the unit. Below is an example of Acceptable (AC) intended learning outcome:

Faculty and students will demonstrate an increased understanding of various library resources (e.g., journal articles, educational DVDs, Reference section, etc.).

Section Focusing on IDF, ISE, MOD and NM

These problems are sometimes less obvious but no less toxic to a good assessment plan. They are so similar that the differences between them are merely a matter of emphases in an assessment plan. Even plans with clearly stated intended objectives and method/performance targets may not connect all the dots in ***closing the loop***. This section elaborates further on the definitions provided in the “Key Code” for assessment scorecards. The examples used in this section are based on real cases reflected in the ***USF Assessment Management System***.

IDF: An **Incomplete Data Feedback** (IDF) loop occurs when the assessment methods/performance targets and/or results and findings sections are not stated with sufficient specificity for the reviewer to infer the means by which unit improvement can occur from the assessment methods/performance targets and/or results and findings.

For example, several intended objectives may be “batch measured” by a single method e.g., a customer satisfaction survey. However, if the survey contains items that are clearly disconnected from the unit goals and objectives, its relevance as an assessment method used to “close the loop” is lost.

IDF Solution: Make sure that in the items contained in the survey as well as the presentation of the findings/results are clearly connected to the mission, goals and intended objectives of the unit. Statements about improvements in the process within a given unit can be particularly robust here. For example, if the findings from the customer satisfaction survey have led to a plan to increase, say, student participation in commencement activities, the case for “closing the loop” has become very powerful.

ISE: An **Incomplete Source of Evidence** (ISE) error occurs when a method of assessment appears to be inappropriate or so vaguely stated that its relationship to an objective is suspect.

Some of these cases are more obvious than others. For example, consider the following objective and its corresponding method of assessment/performance target.

Objective: *Create a technology purchasing policy to standardize purchases*

Method of assessment/performance target: *Create a workflow process.*

The assessment method/performance target stated above does not provide sufficient information as a means of attaining the objective. Also, it is unclear how the creation of a technology purchasing policy to standardize purchases will take place and within what time-frame.

ISE Solution: Thoroughly describe the nature of assessment methods/performance targets and their relationship to the intended objectives. Avoid measures that are not directly connected to the intended objective.

MOD: Whereas, an IDF error is focused on the feedback between an objective or assessment method/performance targets and unit improvement, an assessment method/performance target(s) disconnected from objectives (MOD) error occurs when the assessment methods/performance indicators used to evaluate the quality of unit services on a given objective are insufficiently precise to make an obvious connection between the intended objective and the method of assessment/performance target.

For example, consider the following objective and its corresponding method of assessment/performance target.

Objective: *Developing a more supportive research culture.*

Assessment method/performance target: *Customer satisfaction survey.*

The assessment method/performance target stated above does not provide sufficient description of how the survey will be used towards developing a more supportive research culture. The objective and the means to attain it are disconnected from each other.

MOD Solution: Make sure measures are described with sufficient specificity and that each intended objective referenced has a metric measure in the assessment method/performance target.

NM: The **Non-Metric Measures** (NM) error is common in assessment plans for administrative units and centers on omission of information regarding the assessment method/performance target. For instance, a given unit may state that they would like to “publish a newsletter” as a means of, say, increasing awareness regarding their services on campus. This may be a good strategy, but the mention of a newsletter does not communicate how frequent it will be published or the approximate number of people targeted.

NM Solution: Whereas newsletters can be very good as a means of communication, it always better to indicate the *frequency* of publication and the approximate people the unit intends to reach. This information should be indicated in the methods of assessment/performance targets section.