# Senior Exit Survey Guide

This guide is intended to help you develop survey questions for collecting evidence that students are achieving your program’s learning objectives. Surveys can be a very useful component of a comprehensive approach to learning outcomes assessment, particularly when added to direct measures of student performance. This guide focuses primarily on “Senior Exit Surveys,” a type of survey that programs sometimes administer to students toward the end of their academic careers.

If you have additional questions after reading through this quick guide –about Senior Exit Surveys, or how to include them as part of an overall learning outcomes assessment plan— contact your Assessment Liaison: <https://opair.psu.edu/learning-outcomes-assessment/liaisons/>

## Senior Exit Surveys: who and when

Senior Exit Surveys pose questions to seniors, or other students who are nearing graduation and who are likely still completing coursework at the time of the survey. Capstone or other end-of-program courses or experiences are typical settings for programs to administer these surveys, though they need not be offered in a classroom setting. The timing of Senior Exit Surveys makes them useful for inquiry into program-level objectives, satisfaction with support or services, or other topics focused on short-term decision-making.

## Using Senior Exit Surveys for Learning Outcomes Assessment

Learning objectives in academic degree programs are diverse, and a comprehensive approach to collecting evidence that graduates are meeting them can be strengthened by including a Senior Exit survey. In fact, assessing learning using both student performance \*and\* students’ perceptions of their abilities can provide stronger evidence of learning than either approach alone. Programs often use surveys to collect a wide range of information from students –information that can be very useful for decision-making - but when using surveys to examine learning outcomes, it is important to include questions that focus on the objectives themselves. When it comes to *program-level learning objectives (PLOs)*, certain types of questions are more effective for gathering meaningful information.

To illustrate several approaches to focusing survey questions on learning outcomes, this guide makes an example of one type of PLO common to many programs. Though wording may vary, many programs require students to demonstrate some version of the following:

*EXAMPLE PLO #1: Students will be able to communicate basic biological concepts effectively in oral and written forms.*

### Focusing on Objectives

First, it is important to note that surveys should have an overarching research question that informs the individual items that respondents answer. Put another way, there is an overarching research question under which all the individual items are nested, and which –together—provide an answer to the fundamental question being pursued by the survey. For learning outcomes assessment, the fundamental question is whether, or to what degree, students are meeting the learning objective(s). Simply put, this means that basically every item on the survey should inform that question and provide evidence of whether students are meeting expectations with respect to learning outcomes. For information on other types of survey items that are not directly related to learning outcomes, but that programs often include on surveys, see the section at the end of this guide.

Returning to our example PLO we can see that there are actually two distinct desired objectives embedded within the PLO: a) effective oral communication, and b) effective written communication. As a result, surveys focused on this PLO should include specific questions that address each of the two sub-PLOs.

Many programs articulate high-level objectives such as in this example. Others will further break out their overarching PLOs into clearly articulated sub-PLOs. These often take the form of lists of specific competencies, knowledge domains, or discrete skills. More finely articulated PLOs and sub-PLOs often make it easier to craft effective survey questions for each component.

In the example questions included below, the overarching communication PLO has been broken into four distinct items. The first two address oral communication, the second two address written communication. Both types of communication have been lightly “converted” into specific activities –informal communication activities and formal communication activities. The purpose of this is to provide students more specificity with respect to the activities or capacities they can rate, rather than asking them to think about “oral communication,” which is likely overbroad.

In this fictional program, graduates should be effective at oral and written communication in a range of formal and informal settings. Alternatively, they might need to complete specific communication activities such as giving a sales pitch, explaining a research project, writing a brief, or authoring a monograph. Converting the overarching objective into specific activities that students should be able to do upon graduation from the program provides proxies for the objective that are likely more familiar to students than the high-level and abstract language of some PLOs. When PLOs have been divided into sub-PLOs or competencies, as with many programs, statements can often be lifted directly from the list, often with minimal rephrasing or changing of language.

### Creating effective question stems

After identifying PLOs and effective proxies for their measurement, it is time to match the items to a question stem. Question stems are statements that precede a list of items. This serves to “preload” the first part of the question (for efficient use of a respondents’ thinking capacity, as well as space in the survey) and presents a desired scale across which the respondent can rate each item. Some common scales used in exit surveys are included in the examples below:

Q1: *Effectiveness* doing graduate-levelactivities (or proxies)

Q2: *Personal development* of the specified abilities or graduate-level activities (or proxies)

Q3: *Frequency of opportunities provided* to develop specified abilities to complete graduate-level activities (or proxies)

Q4: *Satisfaction with opportunities provided* to develop specified abilities to complete graduate-level activities (or proxies)

Q1 & Q2 focus on *effectiveness* and *development* of the abilities necessary to complete the proxies/activities. These questions will collect students’ self-perceptions about their abilities to do the things a graduate of the program should be able to do (if the individual items are either those things graduates should be able to do, or are good proxies for those things).

Q3 & Q4 take a slightly different tack by not focusing directly on achievement of objective, but on *opportunities* to develop the ability to complete the activities or achieve the objective. These types of questions can be used to calibrate the degree to which certain components of a program are emphasized, especially if responses to these types of questions tell a coherent story in light of responses to questions like Q1-Q3. These questions can be helpful, but keep in mind that having opportunities to develop a skill does not necessarily mean that students “have” developed the skill. Questions like Q1 or 2 should also be included because they address student learning.

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| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Q1 Please rate your effectiveness at the following abilities. . .** | | | | | |
|  | Not at all effective | Slightly effective | Moderately effective | Very effective | Extremely effective |
| Communicating through informal conversations |  |  |  |  |  |
| Communicating through formal presentations |  |  |  |  |  |
| Communicating through informal types of writing |  |  |  |  |  |
| Communicating through formal types of writing |  |  |  |  |  |

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| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Q2 Please rate your development of the following abilities. . .** |  |  |  |  |
|  | Poor | Average | Good | Excellent | |
| Effective oral communication in informal settings |  |  |  |  | |
| Effective oral communication in formal settings |  |  |  |  | |
| Effective written communication in informal settings |  |  |  |  | |
| Effective written communication in formal settings |  |  |  |  | |

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| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Q3 How often did your program provide opportunities for you to develop the following abilities. . .** | | | | |
|  | Never | Rarely | Sometimes | Always | |
| Effective oral communication in informal settings |  |  |  |  | |
| Effective oral communication in formal settings |  |  |  |  | |
| Effective written communication in informal settings |  |  |  |  | |
| Effective written communication in formal settings |  |  |  |  | |

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| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Q4 Rate your satisfaction with the support you received to develop the following abilities. . .** | | | | | |
|  | Extremely dissatisfied | Somewhat dissatisfied | Somewhat satisfied | Extremely satisfied | | |
| Effective oral communication in informal settings |  |  |  | |  | |
| Effective oral communication in formal settings |  |  |  | |  | |
| Effective written communication in informal settings |  |  |  | |  | |
| Effective written communication in formal settings |  |  |  | |  | |

## Additional Optional Questions to Include

There are a number of reasons to include additional questions on a learning outcomes assessment-focused survey, even if those questions do not directly collect information related to outcomes. For instance, programs may have a host of other topics about which to ask students, and an assessment survey may be a good opportunity to pose those questions to students. Alternatively, questions may be used to group students, which can in turn provide an opportunity to explore differences in student perceptions by, for example, demographics or background experiences. The following is a short list of types of questions that programs might use to supplement their learning outcomes assessment surveys.

* Demographics (sex, race, ethnicity, age)
* Program(s) of study (majors, minors, certificates)
* Student status (full time, part time, first generation, number of semesters)
* Achievement (cumulative GPA, semester GPA, course grade)
* Background experiences (AP courses, study abroad, lab experience, internships, etc…)
* Prior college credits (transfer, PSU campuses, community college, etc…)
* Courses taken (course lists, number of courses, courses above/below specified level)
* Post-graduation plans (further study, career)