



How do we know that teaching is effective or ineffective? One way of evaluating effectiveness is the degree to which the instructor's methods resemble those of a model teacher. In contrast, IDEA's *Diagnostic Feedback (DF)* and *Learning Essentials (LE)* focus on the outcomes of instruction. Students *rate their progress in achieving objectives selected by the instructor*.

The selection of objectives on the *Objectives Selection Form (OSF)* is, therefore, a crucial activity for two reasons. First, the DF and LE assess student progress on *unique, instructor-chosen objectives*. Second, objectives provide guidance for selecting teaching methods; those that promote progress on one type of objective may differ from those that promote progress on other types. Different objectives make each course a unique learning experience.

The educational literature is full of suggestions on how to select and develop goals and objectives (e.g., Ambrose, Bridges, DiPietro, Lovett, & Norman, 2010; Angelo & Cross, 1993; Davis, 2009; Svinicki & McKeachie, 2011; Thorndike, 2005; Walvoord & Anderson, 2009). Becoming familiar with this literature should improve the process of conceptualizing and defining instructional purposes. The purpose of this paper is to offer additional help in identifying which IDEA learning objectives are appropriate for your course.

Although objectives can be stated in a variety of ways, they should always focus on *expected effects on students*, not on the instructor's actions or procedures designed to promote learning. You should begin by developing statements or objectives as precisely and comprehensively as possible. Then, in order to participate effectively in the IDEA program, you need to interpret these statements within the framework provided by the 13 objectives listed on the OSF. The following discussion is intended to help you differentiate meaningfully and accurately among the objectives of the IDEA System.

### How Many Objectives Should be Selected?

Although each of the IDEA objectives is desirable theoretically, it is impractical to think that, in a single

course, students can make significant progress on all, or even most, of them. Not everything that either the instructor or the students might wish to accomplish is possible in a single course.

The teaching methods that facilitate student progress vary for the different objectives. For this reason, and because of the limited amount of time available in a given course, **most instructors will be unable to adequately address more than three to five objectives**. Those choosing more than five objectives commonly spread their efforts too thinly to impact student learning significantly in all areas.

In selecting "Essential" (E) or "Important" (I) objectives for a particular course, ask yourself three questions:

1. Is this a *significant* part of the course?
2. Do I do something *specific* to help the students accomplish this objective?
3. Does the student's progress on this objective affect his or her *grade*?

If the answer to each of these questions is "Yes," then that objective should be identified as E or I on the OSF. The phrase, "Minor or Not Relevant," does not mean that such objectives are unimportant. It simply recognizes that such objectives are considerably less relevant to the course than those chosen as E or I; even if some attention is given to them, an M should be selected on the OSF.

### What is Meant by Each IDEA Objective?

It would be easier to describe objectives if they were mutually exclusive, but they are not. Instructors typically address more than one objective through a single approach. For example, a writing assignment on "the meaning of happiness" may address three objectives: developing writing skills, exploring values, and improving critical thinking. The IDEA objectives have been developed over a period of 40 years through literature reviews and consultations with faculty developers, measurement experts, and faculty who have used the IDEA system. The intent is to provide a *useful, practical* way to describe the objectives of most college courses.

The objectives are organized into five groups on the basis of statistical analyses and conceptual similarities:

- *Course-Specific Knowledge and Skills*
- *General Life Skills*
- *Personal and Social Responsibility*
- *Professional Skills*
- *Social and Creative Development*

What follows is a brief description of each objective's purpose and meaning.

### **Course-Specific Knowledge and Skills**

Two IDEA objectives focus on the development of course-specific knowledge and skills: a basic *cognitive background* in the subject matter and *quantitative literacy*.

- A. Basic Cognitive Background  
*Gaining a basic understanding of the subject (e.g., factual knowledge, methods, principles, generalizations, theories)*

This objective blends Objectives 1 and 2 from the previous version of IDEA SRI. Research convincingly showed substantial overlap existed in both faculty and student ratings on those two objectives. Instructors who selected Objective 1 or 2 in the previous version should select this one.

This objective is mainly *cognitive* in nature as distinguished from *affective* objectives, which focus on feelings or attitudes. It is concerned with the comprehension of information or knowledge.

For those familiar with Bloom's Taxonomy (Bloom, Engelhart, Furst, Hill, & Krathwohl, 1956), the word "understanding" implies such learning is primarily at the comprehension level of the cognitive taxonomy. To comprehend, the student must extend his/her understanding to multiple circumstances or examples. If teaching/learning never goes beyond simple knowledge acquisition, the student will acquire a body of unused—perhaps trivial—knowledge that tends to be quickly forgotten. By comprehending knowledge, students will be more likely to apply it at appropriate times in the future.

- B. Quantitative Literacy  
*Learning appropriate methods for collecting, analyzing, and interpreting numerical information*

This objective directs students to learn methods associated with *quantitative literacy*, an essential learning outcome found in several higher-education publications and accreditation standards. The objective was created for instructors who wish to develop in students both competency and comfort in working with numerical data.

Quantitative literacy involves more than just numerical computation. It implies a way of thinking about the world that depends on analysis of quantitative data for the purpose of drawing conclusions. Instructors most likely design activities that require students to solve real-world mathematical problems. Students might be asked to communicate interpretations of analyses for different audiences than the instructor. Instructors who rate this objective as important or essential should create assignments and assessments that require students to develop and meaningfully communicate arguments supported by quantitative evidence (AAC&U, 2014).

### **General Life Skills**

Three objectives focus on important life skills generalizable beyond the classroom and important for successful living: *communication skills*, *information literacy*, and *critical analysis*.

- A. Communication Skills  
*Developing skills in expressing oneself orally or in writing*

This objective stresses oral or written communication skills. It is obviously relevant to composition and speech courses, as well as to many language and writing courses. It may also be relevant to other courses that use a new language (e.g., mathematics, statistics, computer science), but objectives addressing course-specific knowledge and skills may be more descriptive of the purpose of such courses. Effective communication is an appropriate objective for any course designed to promote clear, grammatically correct writing and/or listening and speaking skills. However, if the objective is chosen as essential or important, it is not enough to simply provide opportunities to exercise communication skills; there must also be deliberate attempts to improve these skills.

- B. Information Literacy  
*Learning how to find, evaluate, and use resources to explore a topic in depth*

This objective aligns with an essential learning outcome of several higher education organizations and accreditation standards. The objective has been modified from its original wording (Hoyt, Chen, Pallett, & Gross, 1999) to include evaluation of resources. By measuring students' abilities "to explore a topic in depth" it also relates to *foundations and skills for lifelong learning*, another essential learning outcome found in several publications. See Learning Objectives Crosswalk: <http://ideaedu.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/01/Learning-Objectives-crosswalk.pdf>.

Educators have increasingly become aware of how quickly knowledge becomes obsolete. We live in a technological, information-based society; effective functioning in this society requires continually updating and enlarging knowledge and skills—*lifelong learning*. In recognition of this reality, many faculty members design courses to enhance students' capacities to function as independent learners. This objective should be chosen as "Important" or "Essential" for courses that emphasize the development of independent learning skills. The emphasis is on skills in finding and using appropriate learning resources, including traditional library searches as well as computer-based information and information shared by practitioners and consultants. This objective is especially appropriate for courses in which students have already acquired sufficient background information and skill to permit them to identify the trends or unresolved problems that are likely to form the basis for future advances in the field.

By focusing on lifelong learning this objective addresses a fundamental, and often over-looked, aspect of learning, extending far beyond knowledge of how to use library resources or browse the Web. It requires a simulation of the personal and professional challenges graduates will face – challenges whose solution rests in *exploring a topic in depth* (AAC&U, 2014). While this objective is frequently cited as one of the purposes of general education, faculty members who want the success of their teaching to be judged by the degree to which students acquire an inquiring mind should select it as important or essential.

- C. Critical Analysis  
*Learning to analyze and critically evaluate ideas, arguments, and points of view*

Critical analysis deals with one of the most distinguishing characteristics of the educated person—*discernment*. Children accept nearly everything that they are told. But as they mature, contradictions

become apparent; not everything can be equally true or valid. Educated persons learn to critically examine information, ideas, and arguments in order to arrive at their own understanding or point of view. Critical thinking, a high-level cognitive characteristic, is regarded as a desirable, but challenging objective in higher education. Instructors choosing this objective will be less concerned with subject matter mastery than with the *capacity to reason logically* and the *ability to integrate* a series of disparate facts or assertions into a coherent conclusion. Assessment of student progress will stress logical consistency and complexity of reasoning rather than correctness.

The ability to critically evaluate and reason is a valuable trait in nearly every line of employment; therefore, many upper-division courses intended for majors give some emphasis to its development. But because it is also a distinguishing characteristic of the educated person, those teaching courses intended to support an institution's *general education* program may also find this objective relevant to their purposes. This objective, therefore, aligns well with *critical thinking*, another essential learning outcome.

### **Personal and Social Responsibility**

Three objectives are concerned with personal and social responsibility pertaining to right and wrong human conduct, interacting in diverse cultures, and making a difference in civic life.

- A. Ethical Reasoning  
*Developing ethical reasoning and/or ethical decision making*

This objective aligns with an essential learning outcome stressed by higher education organizations and accrediting bodies (<http://ideaedu.org/support/accreditation-and-program-assessment/>). It replaces Objective 10 from the previous version of IDEA SRI, which focused on a "commitment to personal values." Feedback from users of IDEA and focus groups comprised of administrators and faculty suggested the need for an objective that specifically emphasizes reasoning about right and wrong conduct. Students must learn to assess their own personal values and understand how people might apply different ethical perspectives to moral dilemmas. Ethical reasoning develops as students practice ethical decision making and learn how to consider multiple viewpoints about various issues. Instructors should select this objective as important or essential if activities and assessments require students to demonstrate the "intellectual tools to make ethical choices" (AAC&U, 2014).

B. Intercultural Perspectives and Global Awareness  
*Developing knowledge and understanding of diverse perspectives, global awareness, or other cultures*

This objective touches both the cognitive and affective domains because students acquire knowledge and skills related to intercultural competence and attitudes of curiosity about and openness to other cultures. Feedback from IDEA users, as well as standards championed by accrediting agencies and educational organizations, confirmed our belief this objective is a high priority. Instructors who select this objective most likely believe students should apply diverse perspectives to complex problems, adopt and apply multiple worldviews, and take responsible actions to address challenges in global systems (AAC&U, 2014).

C. Civic Engagement  
*Learning to apply knowledge and skills to benefit others or serve the public good*

Civic engagement can be demonstrated in many ways. Students might volunteer within the community as individuals or become part of a larger organizational activity. They might participate in elections, engage in activities designed within service-learning classes, conduct applied research, or become involved in service within the community. Instructors should select this objective as important or essential if class assignments and assessments foster student participation in activities that benefit the broader community.

### Professional Skills

Three other objectives focus on professional skills: applying what has been learned to solve problems, making decisions or performing specialized functions, and developing team skills.

A. Applications  
*Learning to apply course material (to improve rational thinking, problem solving and decisions)*

The first of these emphasizes *applications* of principles, theories, and concepts to solve a problem or arrive at a decision. Course materials are employed to develop this *general* intellectual skill. It is appropriate in courses where applications are intended to develop problem-solving skills—analysis, synthesis, and evaluation. Decision-making represents the last stage of this process. It should be noted that the effective implementation of decisions may require additional

affective or interpersonal skills depicted by *Team Skills* or *Communication Skills*.

Sometimes instructors choose this objective because their course requires that students apply course material as a means of testing their understanding. In such cases, *gaining a basic understanding of the subject* is probably a more appropriate choice. In other courses, application is employed principally to develop professional skills, and *Professional Skills and Viewpoints* might therefore be chosen. Only in courses where a *primary* goal is to develop a *generalized* skill in applying course materials to concerns or problems should this objective be selected as essential or important.

B. Professional Skills and Viewpoints  
*Developing specific skills, competencies and points of view needed by professionals in the field most closely related to this course*

This objective emphasizes the development of skills or attitudes needed by those *entering* a specific profession (e. g., calculating physical stresses, developing diagnostic skills, understanding and accepting a code of professional ethics). Such skills and attitudes should be reflected in the performance of a professional assignment, not simply by knowing a correct answer. Depending upon the degree of complexity, this objective could represent any of several levels in Bloom's cognitive taxonomy—application, analysis, synthesis, and evaluation. The attitudinal component is represented in the affective domain of Bloom's taxonomy (Krathwohl, Bloom, & Masia, 1964).

C. Team Skills  
*Acquiring skills in working with others as a member of a team*

From feedback provided by employers, community leaders, and alumni, institutions have increasingly recognized the importance of this objective. Its emphasis is on combining the knowledge and skills of a diverse group in ways that enhance its capacity to analyze and propose solutions to assigned problems. The development of team skills involves a complex set of attributes, including capacities for accepting and appreciating human diversity, listening, communicating, compromising, and sharing responsibility in developing creative proposals and recommendations. Instructors who emphasize the development of team skills will note the overlap with

several other objectives included on the IDEA list, including *Communication Skills, Applications, and Creative Capacities*. If the expectation is that all of these skills will be developed, together with skills involving effective interpersonal relationships, then this objective should be identified as important or essential.

### **Cultural and Creative Development**

Objectives in this category pertain to the development of an appreciation of intellectual/cultural activities and creative capacities.

#### **A. Creative Capacities**

*Developing creative capacities (inventing; designing; writing; performing art, music, drama, etc.)*

This objective has been modified slightly by rearranging the ordering of examples in parentheses. Some users of IDEA had expressed a reluctance to select this objective under the old wording because they believed it primarily emphasized creative writing. However, the objective is intended to connote originality, imagination, and expressiveness across a wide variety of domains. Although often associated with the fine arts and literature, the objective is also relevant to aspects of science, engineering, and other fields where design, research, and innovation are required. The instructional challenge is to help students to develop their creative potential. “Creativity” requires flexibility and divergence in thinking—new ways of thinking or expressing oneself; pursuing questions for which there is no single correct answer. It implies a stretching and expansion of the students’ thoughts and ideas and the development of original insights. For these reasons, it often requires overcoming fear and encouraging self-confidence.

Creative capacities are important not only in the humanities, but also in science, technology, social sciences, and many professional courses (business, education, law, etc.). The development of creative capacities may be expected more often in upper-division courses than in lower-division courses. For this (or any other) objective to be classified as essential or important, it should be a significant emphasis in the course, and there should be specific instruction or assignments designed to promote its development.

#### **B. Broad Liberal Education**

*Gaining a broader understanding and appreciation of intellectual/cultural activity (music, science, literature, etc.)*

Being intellectually well-balanced has traditionally been regarded as a sign of an educated person, especially by advocates of the liberal arts. For many years, colleges and universities offered broad survey courses to give their students opportunities to become acquainted with the content, methods, and importance of the physical and biological sciences, the social sciences, the fine arts, and the humanities. Although the institutional support of such courses appears to have declined, the commitment to the ideal of providing a basic understanding of, and appreciation for, the broad divisions of knowledge has been an enduring tradition. Understanding is often simply the means to an end. By learning to appreciate, students broaden the range of activities that can be interesting and rewarding to them; at the same time, they become more interesting people themselves. The enthusiasm of teachers who are immersed in and enthralled with their intellectual-cultural specialty often spreads to their students. This objective should be selected as important or essential if the focus of the course is on broadening intellectual background and increasing the breadth of students’ interests and appreciations. Such courses are usually directed to non-majors, although they may serve as introductory courses for majors as well.

### **Conclusion**

We hope this discussion will help you select IDEA objectives for your courses. To summarize, there are three criteria that are useful in selecting objectives:

- 1. The objective is a *significant* part of the course;**
- 2. *Specific and substantive* techniques and assignments are employed to help the student achieve the objective; and**
- 3. Relevant assessments are made of student achievement of the objective.**

Objectives should not be regarded as important unless a substantial and explicit effort on the part of the instructor is directed to the achievement of that objective and unless achievement on the objective is meaningfully reflected in the appraisal of student progress.

Frequently, there are differences between the instructor’s and the students’ perceptions of the relevance of a given objective. You should discuss the course objectives with students, preferably early in the term. Let students know that they are going to be asked to rate their own progress on these objectives, and that you take the ratings seriously. Ask them to reflect on their understanding of the course’s purposes

## Some Thoughts on Selecting IDEA Objectives

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and the way in which they believe the various parts of the course fit into the objectives. Thus, the opportunity to consider the relevance of the IDEA objectives to their own purposes in taking your course may, in itself, stimulate success. If student perceptions of the importance of the objectives and their relevance to various portions of the course are substantially different from yours, it may be helpful to explain your rationale for selecting (or not selecting) a given objective. A discussion of such differences will not necessarily resolve them, but it will provide a framework for interpreting student ratings of progress on the IDEA objectives. This should increase the usefulness of student feedback.

Based on interviews with a small number of students, we do not believe that holding such a discussion before the students fill out the IDEA Survey Form will bias results. Students claim that their report of progress on objectives is uninfluenced by the knowledge that the instructor selected the objective as relevant. However, progress is more likely if students and faculty are agreed on the major purposes of the course. Hence, a discussion of such purposes will not only improve the quality of responses to the IDEA form but also be beneficial to the learning process.

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