#### Course Documents, Role-Specific Competencies, and Learning Outcomes

#### A Guide for Clinical Postgraduate PA Program Educators©\*

###### Introduction

The ARC-PA accreditation *Nurse Practitioner & Physician Assistant Residency Program Accreditation Standards*, 1st edition for clinical postgraduate PA programs, effective January 2024,require that the curriculum incorporate specific concepts in the learning environment for standards 4.3, 4.4, and 4.5. The standard’s annotation indicates, “The curriculum has learning outcomes stated in measurable terms for all components of this standard.”

The purpose of this document is to provide a brief description of the role of the course documents and the similarities and differences between learning outcomes and competencies.

### Course Documents

The course documents serve several very important functions.

* Early point of contact and connection between the PA trainee and program educators
* Sets the tone for the course
* Provides information about course logistics (e.g. location, meeting dates/times, etc.)
* Describes expected learning outcomes
* Describes requirements/deadlines for successful completion
* Places the course in a broader context within the curriculum
* Lists required textbooks and available learning resources

In addition to the functions listed above, course documents may also improve the effectiveness of learner note taking, can include material that supports learning outside the classroom, and serve as a learning contract.

Course documents generally include:

* course name,
* course description,
* course goal/rationale,
* outline of topics to be covered,
* *learning outcomes*,
* Instructor of record if known,
* methods of PA trainee assessment/evaluation, and
* plan for grading.

**Role-Specific Competencies**

Competencies are defined as “Expected, measurable levels of trainee performance upon completion of an NP & PA program that demonstrates the integration of specified knowledge, skills, and behaviors. Competencies may include but are not limited to specific knowledge areas, clinical judgments, and behaviors based upon the role and/or scope of practice after completion of the NP & PA program. The competencies are used to organize the curriculum, guide instruction, and direct learning activities that are appropriate for all methods of delivery.”

**Learning Outcomes**

Learning Outcomes are defined as “The knowledge, interpersonal, clinical and technical skills, professional behaviors, and clinical reasoning and problem-solving abilities that have been attained at the completion of a curricular component or supervised clinical experience.” They establish what the PA trainee must be able to do at the conclusion of a curricular component of the program.

A useful learning outcome should:

* Focus on the desired trainee behavior
* Include a specific verb, observable action
* State the desired level of performance

Learning outcomes reflect what the course assessments are intended to show – specifically, what the PA trainee will be able to do upon completing the course.

**Instructional/Course Goals**

Instructional/Course goals are often defined as general statements that define the major purposes of a course, clinical experience, or unit of instruction. They are not readily measurable and may have several interpretations. They are broad references to a general direction of the course rather than any specific description of the process or outcomes. A goal may describe the general intent of a course.

### Relating Learning Outcomes to Expected Competencies

Learning Outcomes and Role-Specific Competencies are both knowledge, behavior, ability, and skill defined outcomes, but they occur at different times in the educational process. Learning Outcomes are to be attained by the trainee while in the program and usually occur at the end of a unit, course, or clinical experience. They are more formative in nature. Role-Specific Competencies refer to abilities required for PA practice and are summative in nature. Learning outcomes are integrally related to role-specific competencies and should reflect the building blocks needed to be attained as the trainee progresses toward the acquisition of role-specific competencies.

**Learning Outcomes and PA Trainee Assessment**

All trainee assessment tools should be linked to learning outcomes. Assessment of learning outcomes serve as a foundation for assessing the trainee's knowledge, skills, and performance. Trainee assessment tools must provide verification that each trainee has acquired the skills outlined in the learning outcomes and is progressing to meet the role-specific competencies. Assessment tools for each unit, course, and clinical experience must parallel the expected learning outcomes identified in the course document.

***Competencies* establish the target for the residency program;**

***Learning Outcomes* are proof of how trainees are reaching the target.**

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\*This document is provided strictly as a resource for clinical postgraduate PA program educators. Adherence to any suggestions is completely voluntary and does not assure compliance with any accreditation standard(s) or a successful accreditation outcome.