

NRS Tips: Learner Goals and NRS Goals—Making the Connection

An effective goal-setting process that focuses on instruction and learning is central to good educational practice. Setting goals allows adult education students to specify what they want to accomplish and provides a benchmark for both individual and program performance.

Goal setting is an interactive process that involves learners in

- ◆ Identifying and recording their goals
- ◆ Determining whether the goals are attainable and measurable
- ◆ Creating a timeline for achieving them based on an appropriate instructional plan and relevant learning activities
- ◆ Establishing a means for periodic review and revision of their goals

Setting Goals Collaboratively

Students often do not know their goals when asked about them, or respond with very broad or unrealistic goals. Programs need to work collaboratively with students to help them develop goals that guide learning and participation. Collaborative goal setting allows program staff members to contribute knowledge of what the program has to offer and to share experiences working with other students in similar situations. Students share their needs and aspirations—the sources of their goals.

Learners are highly motivated to achieve their goals when

- ✓ The goals represent the learners' values
- ✓ The learners are involved in setting their goals
- ✓ The learners can recognize progress toward goals
- ✓ The learners' progress is recognized and praised

Effective Goal Setting

The NRS has few specific guidelines or requirements for goal setting and lets states and local programs determine the procedures that best serve their individual situations. Although generalizing and defining effective procedures can be hard, programs should have clear, documented procedures for assisting students in setting goals. During intake, students should meet with teachers or an intake counselor to identify and set goals. The best goals have five basic characteristics:

- ◆ **Specific** goals let students know what they are striving for and give them a clear target at which to aim.
- ◆ **Measurable** goals let students know when they have achieved their goals.
- ◆ **Attainable** goals are those within a student's reach.
- ◆ **Reasonable** goals strike a balance between pushing students to their limits and not frustrating them.
- ◆ **Time-limited** goals establish due dates that push students to complete a goal. A timeline should include periodic checks on progress.

Breaking down a general goal into its component parts helps ensure that it meets the above criteria. For instance, if a student expresses the desire to get a GED Certificate, it is important to break that goal into the discrete steps necessary to pass the GED test. These steps might involve a student taking a class to improve skills, and then taking a pre-GED class, and subsequently completing a practice GED test. Each of the steps then becomes its own goal.

After you break general goals into specific goals, you should establish a reasonable timeframe for achieving the goals—determining which are short term and which are long term. This approach motivates students and program staff to focus on achieving the short-term goals while enrolled in the program, yet does not discount a student's long-term goals. Work with the student to set a path that is realistic.

Finally, it is important to realize that goals often need to be revised. As time passes and circumstances change, a goal that was once realistic may no longer be achievable or relevant. Students also change their minds as they learn. On the other hand, if goals are revised too frequently or with little reason, they do not work as motivational tools or guideposts to measure progress.

NRS Goals and Learner Goals

How can programs relate learner goals to NRS goals? Listed below are four NRS core outcome measures, in addition to educational gain:

- (1) Entered employment
- (2) Retained employment
- (3) Entered postsecondary education or training
- (4) Obtain a secondary school diploma or GED

The NRS does not require students to use any of these specific goals, and students should set their own goals according to needs and abilities. However, once NRS goals are set, programs are held accountable for determining whether students attain the goals they choose. These goals are known as “follow-up measures” in the NRS because programs must find and follow up with students to see whether or not the students attained their goals. The timeframe for accomplishing these goals is particularly important to consider, because programs must determine whether or not students complete the follow-up measures within the NRS reporting period.

There is often a temptation to avoid setting NRS goals because programs may not want to collect the follow-up measures and then be held accountable. However, accountability works both ways: Programs cannot receive credit or claim success for helping students achieve a goal that has not been set. Programs need to establish a careful balance between helping students set realistic goals for accountability and helping students set goals that serve their needs and provide a realistic picture of program performance.

Additional Resources

See the **NRS Implementation Guidelines and Learning to be an NRS Data Detective: The Five Sides of the NRS** (<http://www.nrsweb.org>) for more on NRS goal setting requirements and guidelines.

Baer, L., & Snell, S. (2001). *Go for the Goal: A “Winning” Approach to Learner-Centered Goal Setting in Adult Literacy*. Chicago: Illinois Literacy Resource Development Center.

Summary of NRS Policies and Guidelines for Setting Goals

What are the four core outcome (follow-up) measures?

- Obtain a secondary credential
- Entered postsecondary education or training
- Entered employment
- Retained employment

Are students required to set any or all of these goals?

- No, programs should work with students to set goals that are appropriate to students' needs and circumstances. However if students set any of the NRS goals, NRS reporting of them is required.

Can students set goals other than the core outcome measures?

- Yes, as long as they are appropriate to students' needs and circumstances. Only the core outcome measures, however, are part of NRS accountability.

What are some important criteria to consider in the goal-setting process?

Set goals that are

- Specific
- Measurable
- Attainable
- Reasonable
- Time limited

When are short-term and long-term goals appropriate?

- Consider breaking goals into short- and long-term goals when it seems unlikely that students will achieve general goals during a single program year.
- Set and extend long-term goals beyond a program year when appropriate.

The **National Reporting System (NRS)** is the accountability system for the federally funded, state administered adult education program. It addresses the accountability requirements of the Adult Education and Family Literacy Act, Title II of the Workforce Investment Act (WIA-P.L. 105–220).

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