

Writing SMART Goals at WWCC: STEPS and Department Workplans

Why this guide

SMART goals can be used in your department in multiple places: workplans, STEPS, and even on your office white board. You can use them anywhere you need to define what you're going to accomplish within a certain amount of time, and what success will look like if you do it.

The 2025-26 STEPS cycle showed why this matters. All 35 areas reported, but only about 1 in 5 goals met the measurability standard, and nearly half could not be measured at all as written.

What was missing in 2025-26 goals	Share of goals
No timeframe	72%
No target	49%
Outcome the unit could not move on its own	About 1 in 4

This guide is for leaders and co-leaders of STEPS reporting areas and anyone who is developing workplans.

How STEPS and your workplan fit together

STEPS (Systematic Evaluation of Programs and Services) is part of Institutional Effectiveness. It aligns department goals, actions, budget requests, and results with the Strategic Plan. STEPS holds the goal, its measure, and its result. Your workplan is the roadmap to get there.

The SMART elements, mapped to the STEPS form

Every SMART element has a home in STEPS Part A. If a field is hard to fill, your goal may be missing an element.

Element	Ask yourself	Where it goes in STEPS Part A
S – Specific	What will be accomplished? Who is involved?	SMART Goal
M – Measurable	What data will show success? How much? How well? What is the starting number?	Indicator of Success, Indicator Type
A – Achievable	Is it doable with our skills and resources? Does our work actually move this result?	Resources, Budget Request
R – Relevant	Which college priority does it advance? Why does the result matter?	Priority Alignment
T – Time-bound	By what date? Is that realistic? What are the interim dates?	SMART Goal (deadline), Achievement Actions (interim dates)

Goals, actions, and measures

STEPS refers to the three parts of every submission as goals, actions, and measures. The goal and actions are read together, so a SMART element can be split across them, but the cleanest goals state the outcome, target, and timeframe in the goal itself.

STEPS term	Form field	Holds	Does not hold
Goal	SMART Goal	The end result, the target, and the timeframe	The task list
Actions	Achievement Actions	The incremental steps toward the goal, each with a term or date	New outcomes that are not in the goal
Measures	Indicator of Success, Indicator Type	What you will count, how, how often, and the baseline	Activities you will do
Department workplan	Workplan and Evidence Upload	Owners, detailed steps, and where each action sits in the year	Anything not reflected in the STEPS goal

A useful pattern for the goal field: **[Verb] [specific result] [to target or standard] by [date]**. For example, "Implement a two-year course schedule by the end of the spring 2026 term."

Worked examples

Example 1: A&S-G1, complete a two-year schedule

This real 2025-26 goal scored 10 out of 10, and the elements are split between the goal and the actions.

Goal as written: "Develop a two-year Arts & Sciences course schedule that involves balancing student needs, academic requirements, and institutional capacity."

Actions as written: Define academic requirements (F 25). Analyze student and institutional data (W 26). Create the two-year draft (Sp 26, with draft of fall completed by 3/26). Review, finalize, and publish (Sp–Su 26). Ongoing maintenance and adjustment.

Element	Where it shows up
S – Specific	"Develop a two-year Arts & Sciences course schedule" (goal)
M – Measurable	Four milestones that are each met or not met (actions)
A – Achievable	Owned by A&S, using its own scheduling process
R – Relevant	"Balancing student needs, academic requirements, and institutional capacity" (goal)
T – Time-bound	F 25 → W 26 → Sp 26 (draft by 3/26) → Sp–Su 26 (actions)

Example 2: improve a service

Starting idea: "XYZ Dept will create and implement a self-service form for students to directly request ABC Service which should decrease their wait time."

On its own, this goal has no target, no baseline, and no date, and "should decrease" names a direction, not a result. The goal is the decrease in wait time; the form is one action toward it.

SMART version: "Reduce average student wait time for ABC Service from [__ days] to [__ days] by [date] by launching a self-service request form by [date]."

- **Indicator Type:** Raw Number (average days from request to service).
- **Indicator of Success:** Average wait time, pulled from [source] each [month/term], against the current baseline of [__ days].
- **Achievement Actions:** Measure current wait time ([term]). Build and test the form ([term]). Launch the form ([date]). Measure wait time again ([term]).

Writing your goal, step by step

1. **Start from the priority.** Pick the strategic priority this goal advances.
2. **Name the end result, not the task.** "Hold four workshops" is an action. "Raise FAFSA completion among new students" is a result.
3. **Check that you can move it.** Ask whether your unit's work directly drives the result. If it depends mostly on another area, narrow the goal to your part or co-own it.
4. **Choose the indicator type.** Decide whether you will report a raw number, a percentage, or a milestone met or not met.
5. **Find the baseline and set the target.** Write down today's number and where you want it to be. For a milestone, define what "done" looks like.
6. **Set the deadline.** For STEPS, pick a date or term you can report on by August 1. For a multi-year goal, name what will be done by this cycle's Part B. For workplans, you may have other deadlines.
7. **List the actions with dates.** Each action is a milestone with a term or date attached.
8. **Name the resources.** List the staff, training, software, or positions you need, and whether any require new dollars. (This is specific for STEPS).
9. **Write the final goal statement.** Use the pattern: [Verb] [specific result] [to target] by [date].
10. **Run the checklist** below before you submit.

Keep the number of goals small. Many goals usually means they are written as tasks.

SMART goal checklist

- ☐ The goal names a result, not a task.
- ☐ The goal states a target, or a clear definition of done for a milestone.
- ☐ The goal has a deadline I can report on by August 1 (this date is for STEPS specifically).
- ☐ Each achievement action has a term or date.
- ☐ The measure says what I will count, how, and how often.
- ☐ I recorded a baseline, or the first action is to collect one.
- ☐ The type of measure matches the result I expect.
- ☐ My unit's work directly moves this result and rolls up to higher level institutional goals.
- ☐ Resources are listed, and the budget request answer is correct (specific to STEPS).
- ☐ The goal is aligned to a strategic priority.
- ☐ The goal and actions for STEPS reporting comes from my department workplan.

Common gaps and how to fix them

The first three gaps account for most goals that could not be measured in 2025-26.

Gap	Looks like	Fix
No timeframe	"Increase tutoring use."	Add "by [term/date]" to the goal, and add dates to every action.
No target	"Improve retention of new students."	State the baseline and the number you are aiming for: "from 62% to 66%."
Outcome outside your control	A support office owning a college-wide completion rate	Measure what your unit drives, such as students served or time to service that can roll up to the larger outcome.
A task, not a result	"Hold monthly advisory meetings."	Ask "so that what?" and make the answer the goal.
Direction without a destination	"Should decrease wait time."	Replace "improve," "increase," or "reduce" with a from-to number.
Indicator does not match the goal	A milestone goal reported as a percentage	Pick the indicator type that matches the type of result you expect.
No baseline	"Grow enrollment by 10%" with no starting number	Record the starting number and its source now. If none exists, make collecting it the first action.

Worksheet for Drafting Smart Goals

Prompt (works for workplan or STEPS)	STEPS field	Your answer
Which college priority does this advance?	Priority Alignment	
What result do you want?	SMART Goal	
What will you count, and how?	Indicator of Success	
What is today's number?	Indicator of Success (baseline)	
What number or milestone means success?	SMART Goal, Indicator of Success	
Raw number, percentage, or	Indicator Type - match the result	

Prompt (works for workplan or STEPS)	STEPS field	Your answer
milestone?	you expect	
By what date or term?	SMART Goal	
What steps, and when?	Achievement Actions	
Can our unit move this result? If not, how will we narrow it?	Reality check, no form field	
What staff, training, software, or positions do we need? (Specific to STEPS)	Resources	
Does any of that need new dollars? (Specific to STEPS)	Budget Request	
Final goal: [Verb] [result] [to target] by [date]	SMART Goal	

Sources

- WWCC STEPS management meeting presentation, 2026-27 (STEPS findings, form fields, timeline, A&S-G1 example)
- [SMART Goals: A How to Guide](#), University of California Office of the President (structure and approach)
- [STEPS Reporting](#), WWCC Integrated Planning and Budgeting (terminology for goals, actions, and measures; Part A and Part B names)
- [STEPS Goal Setting and Assessment Rubric](#), WWCC Institutional Research and Effectiveness, September 17, 2026