

The OUTCOMES Primer: Reconstructing the College Curriculum

Third Edition

Abstract

by

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“As college faculty, we have become experts in studying distinctions at the expense of losing sight of connections. We have developed curriculum within the isolation of the academy, around tables where only faculty are present. Our curriculum design process, more often than not, focuses on what new topic should be covered, and which faculty member wants to cover it. It’s as if we see ourselves living and working in a laboratory that is separate from the rest of life. It’s a process that will not survive the scrutiny of the 21st century.”

*From The OUTCOMES Primer 3e
Stiehl and Lewchuk, 2008*

Ten years have passed since the first edition of *The OUTCOMES Primer: Reconstructing the College Curriculum* came off the press. So the release of this third edition marks the 10th anniversary of our work to help community and technical colleges make a major shift in the way they develop the curriculum to meet the demands of a changing learning environment.

Many who championed our early work wondered if the whole concept of an outcomes-based college curriculum could be sustained, given the cultural traditions of higher education. And we assumed, from the beginning, that implementing the change would be at least a 20-year process and require consistent leadership. Ten years into it, we hold the same prediction.

In ten years much progress has been made, as supported by the fact that we no longer hear an outright rejection or an expression of “it’s just a fad.” Slow but real progress is being made with community and technical colleges leading the way. In direct response to accreditation processes, colleges are beginning to find meaningful ways to collect evidence of learning outcomes and using it to improve learning experiences for students. This third edition reflects the efforts that are being sustained but also reminds us that few of us are even halfway to the realization of the vision.

This edition serves the same purpose as the first edition—a reduction of the confusion that continues to surround the outcomes initiative. In this book, we continue to paint the big picture of the impact of learning outcomes on academic programs, and emphasize the systemic nature of the changes.

Here are the kinds of basic questions addressed in *The OUTCOMES Primer 3e*—setting the stage for more in-depth discussions and problem-solving. These basic questions are fundamental in that they facilitate and authenticate the other two books in our outcomes series—*The MAPPING Primer: Tools for Reconstructing the College Curriculum* (2005) and *The ASSESSMENT Primer: Creating a Flow of Learning Evidence* (2008).

Overall general question

Why are we doing this? In other words, in what ways does the call for student learning outcomes reflect economic, social and intellectual issues of the 21st century?

The process of creating intended student learning outcomes

- What are student learning outcomes?
- Why do we need them now?
- Who should help define the intended learning outcomes?
- What does a good outcomes statement look like? How do you write a good one?
- How “big” are they and how many do we need?
- Are outcomes the same as goals and objectives? Are they the same as competencies or skills?
- Are outcomes always intended?
- Who needs to know the intended outcomes?
- Are outcomes developed for courses, programs or the whole college?
- Aren't learning outcomes only appropriate for professional/technical programs?

The process of choosing course content

- What is the relationship between course content and intended outcomes?
- Why shouldn't courses be designed by first outlining the course content and choosing a textbook?
- If not from a textbook, where does the content come from? When do we decide what content needs to be learned?

The process of creating program level learning outcomes

- What is meant by an academic “program” Isn't “program” the same as “department”?
- Why is “program” a good place to start?
- How do program learning outcomes relate to course and college-wide outcomes?
- How many program outcomes should we have?
- How do program outcomes relate to assessment?
- How can we visualize the relationship between outcomes, courses and major assessment points at the program level and help faculty see the systemic connections?

Creating curriculum planning terms and templates

- How are outcomes incorporated into curriculum plans?
- What does a good outcomes-based curriculum guide look like?
- How does a curriculum plan differ from a course syllabus?

Classroom learning and assessment

- What is the relationship between intended learning outcomes and what we do in our classrooms?
- How do outcomes change the role of the instructor—or do they?
- How important are the intended outcomes to what students do in the classroom?
- What is the relationship between outcomes and assessment?
- What is the relationship between outcomes, assessment and traditional grading in educational systems?
- How do assessment practices change with the development of student learning outcomes?

Faculty development processes: current research

What is the research telling us about:

- faculty responses to the curriculum reconstruction process

- long term effect of outcomes initiatives
- how faculty from different disciplines approach the change differently?
- the types of staff development strategies that work best to move faculty into learning outcomes
- the personal journey of a faculty member from content-based to outcomes-based teaching

In this third edition of the first book in the outcomes series, we continue to use a broad stroke to paint the general picture of the impact of student learning outcomes on the college curriculum, drawing from works in systems theory, ecology, strategic thinking and learning theory. It's an essential read for every college faculty and administration in the midst of curricular change.

Ruth Stiehl is Professor Emeritus, Oregon State University and President, The Learning Organization. She is co-author with Les Lewchuk of *The Outcomes Primer: Reconstructing the College Curriculum* (3rd ed., 2008), *The Mapping Primer: Tools for Reconstructing the College Curriculum* (2005) and *The Assessment Primer: Creating a Flow of Learning Evidence* (2008). Dr. Stiehl lives and works in Corvallis, Oregon.