

**Presidents' Discussion Series**  
**Learning Outcomes**  
**November 14, 2013**

Summary of Discussion

Tracy O'Connor's account of the history of MRC/MRU's institution-wide learning aims was interesting for its emphasis on the amount of controversy and consultation that has informed their development. An original list of outcomes was proposed in 1997 by a committee called the Faculty Curriculum Group. In 2007 that group was replaced by a GFC standing subcommittee, the Learning Outcomes Standing Committee (LOSC), which did a fair amount of research and consultation, and to-and-fro-ing, and eventually developed the current list of "institutional educational aims" which were passed by the GFC and the Board.

While most people at the discussion seemed to be comfortable with the idea of outcomes and institution-wide aims, Dr. O'Connor and others indicated that faculty have raised objections to the idea at various points, feeling that officially-designated aims impinge on academic freedom.

As a point of terminology, Dr. O'Connor pointed out that "outcomes" are meant to be assessable (that is, assess-able) – hence the current institution-wide goals are called "aims." Learning "outcomes" are accordingly meant to be developed at the program and course level.

One problem she indicated is that there are currently two different standing committees with overlapping mandates involving the aims: in addition to the GFC's committee, the LOSC, there is the LOAC (Learning Outcomes and Aims Committee, I think), which is a subcommittee, established by the former VP Academic, of his Academic and Student Services Plans Implementation Committee. (As Dr. O'Connor pointed out, the latter has an amazing acronym).

Kathy Shailer indicated in turn that she wants to change this situation of two competing committees having oversight of outcomes and aims: she feels we need a Teaching and Learning Committee, coming out of GFC, to assess and implement institutional aims and program-level outcomes.

Dr. Shailer also offered an account of her historically changing perspective on the idea of learning "objectives" or "outcomes." At first the idea rankled for her, she said: it felt like another layer of bureaucracy. But she indicates that she began to recognize the value of outcomes as soon as she was, in former roles, in a position to be designing programs: for such a task, identifying institution-level, program-level, and course-level objectives are crucially important for determining how programs and degrees fit into the institution, how they articulate with programs offered at other institutions, and how students coming from diverse places will find suitable pathways in to their programs.

The vocabulary of "outcomes" can be facile, Dr. Shailer commented, but it can also be rich if used well – because identifying them is so important to making programs work well for students.

She emphasized the special value of outcomes from the standpoint of students (vs faculty), as well as from the standpoint of people designing new programs: outcomes tell students what they can expect from a course and from a degree, and it tells them how each course fits with what they've learned already.

Dr. Shailer also emphasized that for her, assessing whether students are really obtaining the outcomes is crucially important, especially in the final year and in capstone courses. Are our students emerging with

what we've promised they will? We need to be ensuring that they demonstrate those skills, knowledges, attitudes, and values, and that we assess that they've done so.

To the point about designated learning outcomes restricting academic freedom, Dr. Shailer argues that the outcomes are a minimal skeleton for the courses – professors are substantially free to flesh the courses out as suits them.

In discussion after the presentations, there was agreement that no single course need to try to satisfy all of the program-level learning outcomes or institution-wide learning aims. But, by the end of their program, students should have had the chance to achieve all of them. There was agreement, as well, that certain institution-wide aims may be enduringly relevant but others will change with the times and the institution; they should be revisited often to make sure they continue to make sense.