

The History of Learning Outcomes and Aims at Mount Royal

Learning outcomes are the essential knowledge, abilities, and attitudes required by graduates of a course or program. They are different from and more useful than teaching objectives in that learning outcomes can be used to guide assessment of student learning. They focus on what the student should learn, rather than on what the teacher plans to teach.

In the late 1990s, the administration of Mount Royal College initiated a process of curriculum renewal. In 1997, the Faculty Curriculum Group (FCG) embarked on the development of "College-wide Learning Outcomes". After much research and consultation, six college-wide learning outcomes were adopted: Communication, Computer Literacy, Thinking, Ethical Reasoning, Information Retrieval & Evaluation, and Group Effectiveness. These six outcomes were expected to guide program and course development, and it was expected that over time, relevant (course/program) outcomes would be included in course outlines. The FCG had cross-campus representation and beginning in 2000, this group was also instrumental in the development and implementation of a *Plan for the Assessment of Student Learning Outcomes at MRC*, phased in over a three year period from 2002 to 2005.

The Learning Outcomes initiative was controversial; many faculty members felt that it impinged upon their academic freedom. Others included the College-wide Learning Outcomes in their course outlines, but with little understanding of what they were there for and of the best practices involved in their assessment.

With the change to bicameral governance in 2007, the General Faculties Council (GFC) established the Learning Outcomes Standing Committee (LOSC), which replaced the FCG. The LOSC mandate is to provide recommendations regarding the development, implementation and assessment of student learning outcomes at Mount Royal.

The LOSC set out to determine whether the "College-wide Learning Outcomes" still met the needs of Mount Royal as a baccalaureate degree-granting institution. The LOSC proposed that Mount Royal's institution-wide learning outcomes might require updating in order to best serve our students' current learning goals and the institution's mission related to excellence in teaching and learning. After reading literature on learning outcomes and researching practices at other institutions, the committee came to the conclusion that broad institutional statements of educational priorities, such as the "College-wide Learning Outcomes" were not really learning outcomes at all. They are not readily assessable. The committee realized that actual learning outcomes are best defined and assessed by faculty members at the course and program level.

After further research and consultation, it was determined that the institutional learning priorities, or outcomes of learning, should be called something other than "learning outcomes." The committee reviewed a broad set of educational priorities recommended in the Liberal Education & America's Promise (LEAP) Report (2007), published by the Association of American Colleges and Universities, and adopted it as a starting point to develop a list that might fit with the mission of Mount Royal University. The committee also searched for a term that could be used to label these educational priorities. After broad consultation and significant revisions, the term "Aims" was suggested, hence the adoption of the *Aims of an Undergraduate Education at Mount Royal University*.

As had occurred previously with the "College-wide Learning Outcomes", there was significant opposition to the new Aims. However, they were approved by General Faculties Council and included in the Academic Plan in December 2011. The Aims were meant to guide the development of program learning outcomes, which would in turn be used to guide the development of course learning outcomes, where the meaningful assessment of student learning occurs.

In 2012, the Learning Outcomes and Assessment Committee (LOAC) was established in order to coordinate the development, implementation and assessment of program and course learning outcomes aligned with the

institutional Aims. This new committee was chartered by the Academic and Student Service Plans Implementation Committee, and was sponsored by the Provost and VP Academic. The mandate of this committee seemed to overlap with the GFC Learning and Outcomes Standing Committee. Members of the LOSC recommended to General Faculties Council that the implementation of learning outcomes was an academic matter and that members of GFC should have input into that process in some manner. The LOSC can provide a mechanism for that input. There is no obvious mechanism for GFC members to provide input to the Academic and Student Services Plans Implementation Committee, to which the LOAC would report. A decision needs to be made as to which committee(s) will be responsible for overseeing the implementation of learning outcomes at Mount Royal University.

Acknowledgements

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References:

ADC Curriculum Renewal Webpage (2011)

http://www.mtroyal.ca/ProgramsCourses/FacultiesSchoolsCentres/TeachingLearning/Departments/AcademicDevelopmentCentre/CurriculumAssessment/ssdata_adc_cna_cr (no longer connected to ADC main page)

Alex Bruton, Annual Report of the Learning Outcomes Standing Committee: *From Outcomes to Aims* (2010)

General Faculties Council Bylaws (2012)

http://www.mtroyal.ca/wcm/groups/public/documents/pdf/gfc_by-lawsmay2012.pdf

Mount Royal University Academic Plan, *Inspiring Learning* (2011).

Appendix – Historical Notes from Annual Report of the LOSC: *From Outcomes to Aims* (2010)

The Faculty Curriculum Group (FCG) was established to guide the implementation of the initiative and had representation from College faculty, students, and administration.

- In 1997 the FCG initiated plans to raise awareness of outcomes-based curriculum through a survey of faculty, students, administration, and other College and community stakeholders;
- Identification of six College-wide learning outcomes was a key outcome of the survey;
- Six learning outcome teams of Mount Royal faculty spearheaded the definitions of each learning outcome and the components comprising them;
- Between 1999 and 2004, the FCG developed a series of four bridge documents and an overview document designed to be of practical assistance to faculty;
- In January 1999 a *MRC Curriculum Renewal Initiative: Faculty Information Package* was created;
- Spring 1999 the six outcomes were accepted in principle by Academic Council and the BOG;
- From 2000 to 2002 the FCG led the development of the *Plan for Assessment of Student Learning Outcomes at Mount Royal*;
- The assessment plan was implemented between January 2002 and September 2005 to provide academic areas time and opportunity to develop and refine assessment plans;
- The FCG sponsored an annual (spring) *Teaching Learning Institute* and *Showcase of Student Learning* from 1999 to 2006;
- Based on a recommendation in the 2006 Academic Plan (3c) accepted at the December 6, 2006 Academic Council meeting, it was stipulated that: “given our commitment to the value of learning outcomes, make the FCG a standing committee of Academic Council and conduct a review to determine which outcomes are appropriate at which levels. When the General Faculties Council (GFC) came into effect in 2007, the Learning Outcomes Standing Committee (LOSC) became a standing committee of the GFC, and has been working since that time to fulfill its purpose, outlined in the committee charter.