

Working Together to Define and Measure Learning in the Disciplines

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What does it mean to major in sociology, or history, or business? What can a student expect to learn in an introductory-level economics course, or in an economics major? How do we know whether communications students or biology students have acquired a set of knowledge and skills that will enable them to achieve their personal and professional goals after graduation?

Questions such as these are perennial in higher education—students, parents, educators, employers, administrators, and policy makers ask them all the time. Over the years, many departments and disciplinary societies have recognized the importance of grappling with these questions in meaningful ways. It is no longer uncommon to find a list of major-level learning outcomes on a departmental website. Increasingly, departments are working to map their curriculum onto these learning outcomes and to sequence courses to scaffold student learning. Some departments have even been able to put together meaningful assessment plans that inform improvements over time.

Since 2013, the Measuring College Learning (MCL) project has striven to increase the scale and accelerate the impact of these important efforts. One of the principle rationales behind the project is that departments should not have to “go it alone” when it comes to defining and assessing their students’ learning outcomes. To be sure, every department should be empowered to craft a curriculum that is reflective of its unique character and mission, but they should also have access to high-quality resources, generated at the national level by experts in the discipline, that can be used to inform, facilitate, and further their efforts. Another key rationale behind the MCL project is that disciplines can learn from one another—lessons learned about curriculum design and assessment in one discipline can oftentimes be leveraged by other disciplines.

To achieve these goals, the MCL project, under the auspices of the Social Science Research Council and with the generous support of the Teagle Foundation and the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, brought together faculty members and disciplinary association leaders from six disciplines—biology, business, communication, economics, history, and sociology—and engaged in a series of forward-thinking conversations about discipline-specific learning outcomes and assessment. Drawing on prior work in their fields and related work in other fields, participants in the project grappled with the kinds of challenging questions posed at the beginning of this essay: What does it mean to major in a particular subject? What can students expect to learn at the introductory or major level? How can we meaningfully and responsibly measure what students are learning? What kinds of tools do we already have at our disposal that can help us to measure this learning, and what kinds of tools should we work together to build in the future?

Viewpoint

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Over the course of more than two years, each of the panels of experts in the MCL project made significant strides towards advancing their discipline's thinking around these important issues. Thanks to the hard work of representatives from each panel, these insights have been translated into a series of ambitious, engaging, and practically oriented white papers. The MCL white papers have been published as an edited volume by Jossey-Bass (*Improving Quality in American Higher Education: Learning Outcomes and Assessments for the 21st Century*) and are also available for individual download via the Social Science Research Council's website. These white papers promise to serve as valuable resources for department-level, discipline-level, and institution-level efforts to enhance the quality and intentionality of undergraduate education.

Each of the MCL white papers is unique, but all of them share a similar overarching structure. They begin with an overview of prior and ongoing efforts to define and measure learning outcomes in their disciplines. Next, building on these efforts and integrating new insights from the MCL panel discussions, each paper articulates a set of "essential concepts and competencies" for undergraduate student learning in the discipline. These essential concepts and competencies are ideas and skills that faculty believe are fundamental to the discipline, valuable to students, and worth emphasizing given limited time and resources. They represent a significant level of national consensus among faculty today, and are reflective of the kinds of high-level understandings and skills that society demands of today's college graduates. Following this discussion of essential concepts and competencies, each white paper presents a persuasive and creative vision for the future of assessment in the discipline. The papers advocate for the development of rigorous, 21st Century assessment tools that are closely aligned with concepts and competencies that are valued by faculty, students, and society. They encourage educators to address calls for accountability head-on by demonstrating with multiple forms of high-quality evidence the contributions they make to students' lives, and to using this evidence to drive continuous improvement at the classroom, department, and institutional level. In sum, the MCL white papers are a series of forward-thinking accounts of how undergraduate education should be organized and evaluated in contemporary U.S. society.

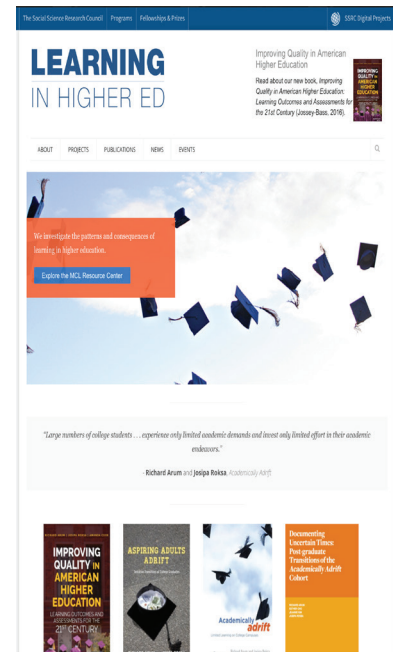
Institutions, departments, and faculty members from across the country are working to improve the quality and coherence of their undergraduate academic programs. They have recognized the need to create, as the [Teagle Foundation](#) has put it, "more coherent and intentional curriculum whose goals, pathways, and outcomes are clear to students and other constituencies with a stake in the future of higher education." This is no simple task, and individual institutions and departments should not be expected to undertake it on their own. They need—and they want—support from the broader higher education community. In part, this means having access to high-quality curricular resources that have been designed by faculty, for faculty. The power and positive impact of these kinds of resources is exemplified by AAC&U's work on liberal learning and general education. Now, thanks to the hard work of dozens of faculty members and their disciplinary associations, the MCL project has produced a complementary set of resources for a group of six disciplines. These white papers—and the learning outcomes frameworks they articulate—can have a significant, positive, and long-lasting impact on discipline- and department-level efforts to enhance the coherence, intentionality, and effectiveness of their academic programs.

The Measuring College Learning Project is committed to the idea that the articulated frameworks are part of an iterative process that will evolve and change over time. As part of plans for phase two of the project, we envision building out and piloting assessments

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based on the learning outcomes frameworks presented in the white papers. We look forward to the work to come, as part of a collaborative process with faculty, disciplinary associations, employer groups, and other stakeholders concerned with improving student learning in higher education.

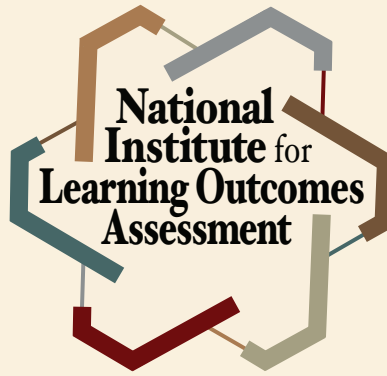
To learn more about the Measuring College Learning project, and to access the six MCL white papers, visit the Measuring College Learning Resource Center at <http://highered.ssrc.org>.



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