

The Tools of Intentional Colleges and Universities: The DQP, ELOs, and Tuning

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Imagine a scholar submitting an article to a learned journal. After the customary opening, the author declares that the objectives of his article are nowhere clearly defined. “My intent will emerge in due course,” he says. He adds that he has made no effort to structure his argument so that its different elements will add up to a coherent whole. He expects his readers to do some assembly, after all. He concludes confident that his readers will eventually appreciate the importance of his article, even though it may take them many years to do so.

The scenario is absurd, of course. Editors expect scholars to clarify their objectives and to organize their arguments with care. Otherwise, the submission earns a quick return trip.

Yet who has not heard a faculty member say that his courses must evolve each semester, that being too definitive at the beginning about what is to be accomplished leaves no room for spontaneity and exploration? And who has not heard a faculty member claim that his students learn to value his teaching months or years after the class has ended? And who has not heard a faculty member ridicule the emerging emphasis on clear learning outcomes as simply the latest fad?

The underlying issue is one of intentionality — a core scholarly virtue far too often neglected in discussions of degree-level outcomes, in departmental curricular considerations, and in the construction of syllabi. The results of this double standard can be pernicious. Students left in the dark about anticipated learning outcomes are likely to be less motivated and less persistent. Faculty unaware of a department’s programmatic objectives may feel free to teach according to their own idiosyncratic preferences rather than in accord with a consensus of their colleagues. And departments without the guidance of clear degree-level outcomes at the institutional level can hardly contribute to the accomplishment of a coherent educational vision.

Intentional colleges and universities begin by defining their understanding of what degree recipients should know and be able to do. They express this definition in terms that are easily understood and that will prompt assessment. Departments then respond to this understanding by defining how student accomplishment of their specific programmatic outcomes will align with those of the university. Departments will in turn develop curricula that lead students to such accomplishment. And faculty members will make certain that the courses they teach are consistent with such curricula.

There’s nothing startling here — simply the application of traditional scholarly values to college teaching. What is startling is how few colleges and universities are able to claim such intentionality. That is the bad news.

Viewpoint

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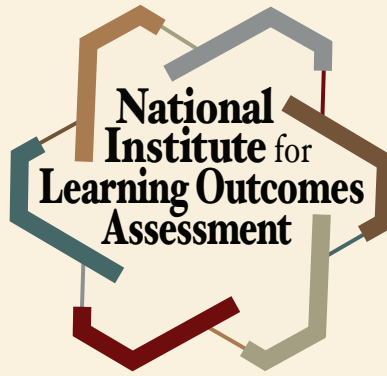
The good news is that there are tools that now provide a platform for institutions committed to greater intentionality: the “kissing cousins” of thoughtful curricular design, the Essential Learning Outcomes published by the Association of American Colleges and Universities and the Degree Qualifications Profile published by Lumina Foundation. Both documents consider the same question: What should a 21st century college education signify in terms of student learning? But they address that question in different ways. The ELO’s ask what are the liberal learning objectives that represent broad requisites for effective degree programs, while the DQP asks *what* learning — specifically — should degree recipients be able to *demonstrate*. And *how* should they be able to demonstrate their learning. Together, these documents offer an unprecedented resource for an institution that takes seriously the challenge of greater intentionality.

And there’s more good news in Tuning, the ideal complement to both the ELO’s and the DQP — perhaps a second cousin? Tuning invites faculty within disciplines to frame outcomes at the disciplinary level that while consistent with degree-level outcomes enable students to understand what they should know and be able to do *at each state of their professional preparation*. Recent experience has suggested that the coordinated introduction of both degree-level and disciplinary outcomes as a measure of curricular effectiveness and student success offers a more secure platform for change than a focus on either by itself.

The interests of students, the credibility of disciplines, and the viability of institutions will depend increasingly on greater intentionality. Indeed, if higher education is to avoid the standardization that would destroy the valuable variety of institutions and institutional missions, higher educators must become more intentional about standards. Even as the costs of ignoring this challenge are becoming all too apparent, the benefits are becoming conspicuous.

Operators are standing by. The resources needed to respond are freely available: the ELOs and the DQP. The urgency is apparent. Why wait?

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