

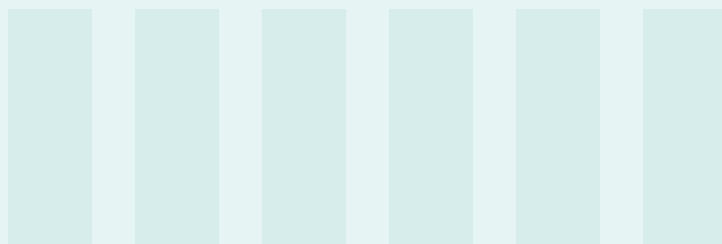


VERSION 3

**DQP**

# THE BIRTH AND GROWTH

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&  
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# DQP 3.0: The Birth and Growth

In 2009, speaking to Congress in his first State of the Union Address, President Barack Obama called on the nation to regain an important measure of global leadership—“the highest proportion of college graduates in the world.” Later that year, Lumina Foundation released a strategic plan focused on a “big goal,” that by 2025 at least 60% of Americans would have earned “a high-quality postsecondary degree or credential.”

These closely aligned challenges shared two characteristics. First, both were ambitious given the level of accomplishment at the time. Second, both included a critical phrase: “high quality.” Either goal might easily have been accomplished through the relaxation of standards and the easing of educational rigor, but credentials reflecting such compromises would have contributed neither to the well-being of society nor to the competitiveness of the nation. For the achievement of these goals to have genuine significance, the credentials awarded would have to be of “high quality.”

In the absence of a widely accepted definition for quality in postsecondary education, Lumina took a lead role in framing one, the [Degree Qualifications Profile](#). The process it chose to follow began in July 2009 with a facilitated discussion of prominent US and European educators, association leaders, government officials, and postsecondary education executives. Meeting in breakout sessions and plenary discussions, participants debated what approaches might lead most effectively to a useful understanding of “high quality.” The commissioning of white papers and the convening of regional meetings were among the possible alternatives advanced and discussed. Finally, the meeting arrived at a consensus that there was the need for a framework, a “profile” that would define what degrees signify in terms of what students should know and be able to do. While informed by an awareness of international models, in particular those developed through the Bologna Process, the US framework would be distinctively American in its values and emphases. It would acknowledge the credentialing objectives established by Goal 2025, reflect the diversity of American postsecondary education, and establish a benchmark for curricular evaluation and improvement.

At a second meeting the following January, a smaller group of strategic thinkers convened by Lumina debated what might be the most effective means of developing this framework. Again, various approaches were considered: the publication of an RFP to the scholarly community, the commissioning of expert opinions, consultations with academic associations and other organizations, and the like. Again a consensus emerged: the Foundation would appoint a small panel reflecting breadth of expertise and experience.\*

\*The panelists were Clifford Adelman, Senior Associate, Institute for Higher Education Policy; Peter Ewell, Vice President, National Center for Higher Education Management Systems; Paul L. Gaston, Trustees Professor, Kent State University; and Carol Geary Schneider, President, Association of American Colleges & Universities.

It would instruct the panel to consider useful models but work independently to create to a preliminary draft that would be circulated widely for comment. The panel would then consider recommendations from the field in revising the document for publication. In less than one year, the process moved from preliminary discussions in Washington, DC, to the publication of the beta *Degree Qualifications Profile*.

Released in January 2011, the beta DQP reflected the commitment of its authors and advisors to learn from earlier efforts, both within the US and internationally, to define and describe learning outcomes. The influence of the *Essential Learning Outcomes* published by the Association of American Colleges & Universities was especially pronounced. Indeed, the two documents, while they have different purposes, remain closely complementary. But it was also clear that the DQP was meant to point towards a new direction for US postsecondary education. For instance (paraphrasing the current edition of the DQP):

- The student—what students should know and be able to do as they move through progressively higher levels of postsecondary study—is the primary reference point. Not the institution.
- The DQP presents outcomes for the associate, bachelor’s, and master’s degrees by articulating increasing measures of student performance for each in terms of learning outcomes.
- While attempting to clarify expectations of these degrees, the DQP does not attempt to “standardize” US degrees. The “profile” signals the expectation that faculty responsible for fields of study and programs will develop specific expectations for student accomplishment in their areas of special-ized knowledge.
- The DQP’s learning outcomes are written using active verbs that emphasize what students actually should be able to do to demonstrate proficiency through assignments. It avoids abstractions such as “appreciation” and “exposure.”
- The DQP provides a qualitative set of learning outcomes—not quantitative measures such as number of credits and grade point averages—as the basis for awarding degrees. DQP proficiencies are intended not as statements of aspiration for some, but as descriptions of what every graduate at a given level ought to know and be able to do.

With the publication of the beta document, the process of developing a second iteration began. The DQP authors and others, working with institutions and associations making use of the DQP, carefully noted concerns and suggestions. The analyses and opinions of international and US experts were sought and considered. Employers joined the conversation. Over a three-year period nearly 400 institutions engaged in sponsored and independent projects involving the DQP and many experts provided commentary. The release of the “first edition” in 2014 offered a DQP informed by experience and enriched by broader expertise.

As the accompanying overview by Natasha Jankowski suggests, the story continues as information gathered on the impact and use of the DQP helps to guide the 2021 process of revision under NILOA’s oversight. The result will be a new chapter in the account of the DQP—but not the last one, one imagines.

For those not familiar with the [Degree Qualifications Profile \(DQP\)](#), it is a learning framework which outlines what students who graduate with an association, bachelor's, or master's degree should know and be able to do, regardless of major. In other words, it provides a reference point to answer the question: What can be expected of a degree holder in terms of knowledge, skills, and abilities?

The beta version of the document was released in 2011 and updated in 2014, informed by feedback from over 800 pilot institutions that tested various uses of the DQP. The beta version of the DQP was written by four main authors as part of a larger, rigorous review and development process which is outlined in the first part of *Birth and Growth of the DQP*. Three of those original authors have released blog posts with suggestions for revisions as well as co-authored an afterword for their colleague Cliff Adelman, who passed away in 2018 but whose impact on the document is clear.

The DQP is composed of five learning categories including:

- Specialized Knowledge
- Broad and Integrative Knowledge
- Intellectual Skills
- Applied and Collaborative Learning
- Civic and Global Learning

Within the [learning framework](#), each category has three levels of learning progression from associate, bachelor, to master's degree. Under each of the levels are verb driven proficiency statements indicating what a graduate at a particular degree level could *do* with their knowledge and skills. These statements are written in a manner that indicates the types of assignments or tasks a student might be assigned to demonstrate proficiency. In this way, the DQP does not prescribe content or pedagogical approaches to attainment of the statements, but instead provides a reference point to which intentional curriculum and assessments may be built ([Ewell, 2013](#)).

NILOA had the pleasure of tracking and mapping institutional piloting of the DQP from 2010-2016. To learn more about the pilots and what was learned from that period, see the [series of reports](#) were released along with work on [assignment design](#) as well as a [Learning Systems Paradigm](#).

As a learning framework, the DQP had an impact on pilot institutions in terms of revision of learning outcomes, curriculum alignment, assignment design, program development, intentional learning design, and transfer conversations. [Peter Ewell reminded readers in his blog](#) that the DQP can also be a useful tool for competency-based education efforts. However, challenges remained in the form of awareness – of both the DQP itself and its potential uses. In part, this may come from the document being viewed at times as a solution in search of a problem, but it may also come from how it was used by institutions. Most often, the DQP served as a reference point, but not something to which the institution returned once internal design was reviewed against the statements within the learning framework. A “one and done” approach to use hindered wider awareness and promotion of the DQP.

Further, in some ways, the DQP is an aspirational document in terms of the potential for intentional design throughout an institution of higher education with developmental curriculum that builds to clear degree proficiency statements for every graduate. A design that has yet to be fully realized.

It is a document with an eye to what the future of higher education could be if intentionally designed in stackable ways such that every student who leaves with a degree can demonstrate attainment of certain knowledge, skills, and abilities – regardless of degree program. Overall, the document itself remains relevant, but awareness and engagement are low. In addition, it has been the intent of the authors that the DQP would be periodically updated and revised. We find ourselves at the point of the ten-year anniversary of the beta document, and so a revision process was set into motion with plans for a revision release that would help build awareness and engagement.

## **The Revision Process**

The revision process includes examination of institution-level learning outcome statements for continued fit and relevancy of the DQP at an institution or degree-level; exploration of alignment with associated learning frameworks and initiatives that have emerged since the release of the DQP in 2014 and/or have been revised since the DQP release; and interviews and virtual working groups to provide targeted recommendations for revisions from specific areas of voiced concern from the field.

While the five areas were found to still be relevant, more is known about implementation challenges, where there is confusion in engagement with the document, and which disciplines and/or institutions did not see themselves in the document. To address these concerns, the working group membership was broad, reflecting an intentional aim to bring in new voices and participants to the process. Review panel members were selected based on a lack of familiarity with the document and its history to ensure a fresh perspective was brought to the discussion.

### *Employability*

**Paul Gaston, in his DQP blog post**, focused on career preparedness suggestions for revision to the document. In a review of institutions that utilized the DQP in program design, the inclusion of a separate category of professionalism or employability was the most often added column to the existing five categories of the DQP. Employability was examined in the revision process by comparing the DQP to employability frameworks, institutional learning outcome statements on employability skills, and interviews with employer organizations and representatives.

### *Community College*

Working groups included a community college working group to address concerns raised by community college users that they did not see themselves in the current document or agree with the verb levels of the associate-degree statements. Of all the institutional revisions made to the DQP as found in the mapping and tracking of institutional engagement with DQP, the most revisions occurred at the associate-level. Working group members met virtually and provided suggested edits to the statements.

### *Equity*

Working groups also included a group focused on equity to better integrate issues of equity and social justice throughout the DQP, potentially not as something that students simply explored but something that required action and application within its own category. **Carol Geary Schneider reminded readers of her blog post** about the need to be more explicit in the application of the five areas of learning to complex problems, including democratic equality.

The equity working group not only examined the language utilized throughout the DQP, but raised questions about the end to which such knowledge should be put by graduates asking, should degrees actively work to end misunderstanding?

### *STEM*

In a review of faculty engagement with the DQP, STEM faculty repeatedly indicated that the document was meant for humanities as opposed to STEM disciplines. As such, institutional learning outcome statements from STEM disciplines and interviews with faculty and disciplinary organizations helped inform revision suggestions to be more welcoming to STEM fields in content as well as presentation.

### *Presentation*

Considerations in the revision were not exclusive to suggested edits to the statements but involved discussions on the presentation of the framework as well. Even among those familiar with the DQP, surprise was expressed that there was a **full document** and not just a **learning framework excerpt**. What was most often shared and reviewed by colleagues was the **grid** of the learning framework itself. Thus, in presentation, the revision strives to release a stand- alone framework document with no expectation of familiarity with other content related pieces. Further, recommendations from the working groups and users entailed creating separate framework documents for each degree level. Thus, while structure will not likely change, presentation will.

## **Next Steps**

Once the revised version of the DQP is released, much like assessment, the revision process will continue over time with future updates and editions to the DQP released, keeping the profile timely, relevant, and useful to the field of US higher education.

Should you have additional comments or recommendations for revision, please share with [niloa@education.illinois.edu](mailto:niloa@education.illinois.edu).