



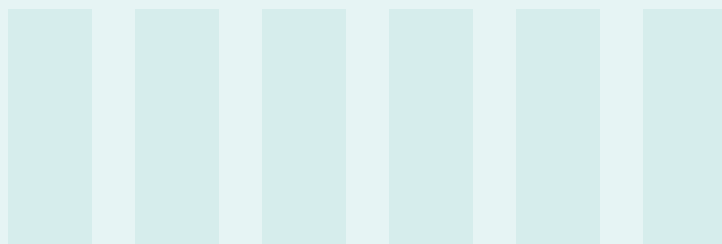
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DQP REPORT

Institution-Level Learning Outcomes: Where Are We Now?

National Institute for Learning Outcomes Assessment

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Institution-Level Learning Outcomes: Where Are We Now?

Background

The Lumina Foundation prioritized Competency-Based Learning for action as a part of its 2017-2020 Strategic Plan. The Degree Qualifications Profile (DQP) aligned with and supported Lumina's Postsecondary Learning and its Institutional Mobilization strategies to ensure that all learning counts for adult learners including prior learning, work-based learning, non-institutional learning—that is recognized and valued in attainment of high-quality credentials. Initially released in 2011, the DQP exists as a learning-centered framework for what college graduates should know and be able to do to earn the associate, bachelor's, or master's degree.

Learning frameworks can have meaningful impacts on learning recognition. For instance, after engagement with learning frameworks for revision of learning outcomes and curriculum alignment, of participating institutions: 82% explored stackable and scaffolded credentials; 77% identified better on and off ramps for learning based on student mobility; 64% identified scaling up of prior-learning assessment as a critical need; and 63% expressed a strong desire to move towards competency-based education (Unpublished NILOA report, n.d.). Follow-up surveys indicated faculty and staff who participated in mapping and assessment alignment experiences, when done well, were more willing than their counterparts at non-participating institutions to accept learning from a variety of sources, to the tune of 85% likely to accept various sources of learning to 17% (Unpublished NILOA report, n.d.).

This report was conducted by the [National Institute for Learning Outcomes Assessment \(NILOA\)](#) and is a national review of existing Institution-Level Learning Outcomes (ILOs) statements in relation to the DQP to: 1) Identify points of connection and difference to consider for revision; and 2) Inform marketing of the release of the revised DQP based on relevancy and fit to the field. This research can also help identify implementation resources needed to support a revised DQP that works to advance degree quality. Read the footnote below to see why NILOA was chosen to lead this work¹.

Acknowledging that postsecondary education systems are in a different space and place since the DQP's first revision in 2014, the DQP's "inherent flexibility...in dealing with a broad array of emerging issues" needed to reflect current language and issues of equity and employability to align with current educational environments and context (Adelman, Ewell, Gaston, Geary Schneider, 2014, p. 5). Integrating employability into assignments and degree pathways through the ways in which students demonstrate their learning in contexts that matter to both higher education and employers, as well as highlighting current work done at our nation's colleges and universities working to make courses, assignments, programs, and institutions as a whole more equitable has been a focus of the current DQP revision. What is less clear and drives the need for this report is if such shifts are appearing within ILO statements that can serve as a model or examples for DQP language updates and usage.

Institution-Level Learning Outcomes (ILOs)

Over 80% of institutions who responded to the 2018 NILOA survey indicated that they had ILO statements, or an explicit set of student learning outcomes common to all undergraduates across all majors (Jankowski, Timmer, Kinzie, & Kuh, 2018). This is an increase compared to our first survey in 2009, where the average was 75% of institutions that had ILOs (Kuh & Ikenberry, 2009).

Increased posting of ILOs to internal and external audiences is certainly worthy of celebration. Institutions recognize that such posting increases transparency of intended learning of its students to internal and external audiences (Jankowski & Provezis, 2011). As more institutions post ILOs, there is increased scrutiny in the wording

¹ NILOA's involvement with the Degree Qualifications Profile is extensive. Since our work in tracking and mapping institutional use of the DQP, creating and updating the initial website housing DQP resources, archiving DQP resources on our current website, and promoting the DQP to the field, we are intimately familiar with the DQP as well as the place of learning frameworks in advancing high-quality credential design, development, and completion. Additionally, our work in equity and assessment alongside our partnerships with employer organizations also positions us to update the DQP for inclusive language and employability integration with an intentional focus on equity.

of those ILOs. In NILOA's (2016) policy statement, we encouraged institutions to develop specific, actionable learning outcome statements.

Learning outcome statements are most useful when they are crafted to inform effective educational policies and practices, not to meet compliance demands by external groups. When they are concrete and clear about the proficiencies students are to achieve, such statements provide reference points for student performance, not just for individual courses but the cumulative effects of a program of study. Doing this demands active, operational verbs to guide the design of assignments that motivate students to demonstrate the desired outcomes in a way that can be verified. Clear, specific statements describing desired outcomes also make it possible for faculty to align curriculum and pedagogy with intended proficiencies, which is essential to ensuring that a program is, indeed, achieving its purposes. Such statements also make it easier for students to understand and appreciate institutional and program expectations for their performance and how their learning will equip them to handle what they encounter after college (pg. 5).

Anthology (formerly Campus Labs) conducted a content analysis of the 15,521 learning outcome statements of its users in its white paper, *Degree of Difference: What Do Learning Outcomes Say About Higher Education?* Intellectual skills was found as the "primary learning outcome theme in higher education" across all institutions reviewed (LaCount & Jackson, 2019, p. 22). It should be noted that the intellectual skills discussed in Anthology's report are similar to the intellectual skills spelled out in the DQP. However, for the most part, LaCount & Jackson offered up additional learning outcomes not discussed in the DQP. For instance, personal development was one commonly found across institutions and is not currently in the DQP. As the DQP revision unfolds, ensuring that changes are inclusive of and in alignment with the larger field and language used by institutions, such as in the Anthology study, requires an examination of ILOs to inform the revision process of which is discussed next.

Data Collection

To help guide this research, we asked the following questions:

1. Do institutions have institutional learning outcomes for the entirety of their institution that totals into a degree?
2. Is there alignment with the DQP 5 areas of learning²?

An Excel spreadsheet served as the medium for data collection. Research analysts collected the following information for a purposeful sample of 162 institutions:

- Institution name;
- City, State;
- Control (public; private; 2 year; 4 year);
- Institutional type (Tribal College & University (TCU); Historically Black College & University (HBCU); Hispanic Serving Institution (HSI); Asian American and Native American Pacific Islander-Serving Institution (AANAPISI));
- Indication if an Excellence in Assessment (EIA) Designee;
- Website link to institutional learning outcomes; and
- If the website listed the institutional learning outcomes (yes, no, maybe, n/a).

Information was collected from all 34 TCUs, 50 HBCUs, 26 HSIs, 13 institutions designated as both an AANAPISI and HSI, and 39 EIA Designees (all Designees to date at the time the review was completed). Due to the focus on equity in the revision, the sampling intentionally focused upon inclusion of ILOs from a variety of Minority-Serving Institutions (MSIs). Further, the Excellence in Assessment designees were included as exemplars of assessment work with intentionally focused institution-level assessment efforts, meaning they were best positioned to provide an

² [DQP 5 Areas of Learning](#): Specialized Knowledge, Broad and Integrative Knowledge, Intellectual Skills, Applied and Collaborative Learning, and Civic and Global Learning.

informative view of institution-level learning outcome statements.

Findings

The purpose of this report was to analyze existing ILO statements in relation to the DQP to identify points of connection and difference to consider for revision. A few findings resulted from such analysis.

1. *The DQP remains relevant and aligned.* In NILOA's check for alignment of over 160 institutions, it was determined that the 5 areas of learning of the DQP are still relevant to ILOs in higher education. For the most part, most institutions stayed between the 3-7 ILOs/institutional goals/institutional objectives considered good assessment practice (NILOA, 2016). That said, there were a few additional ILOs found within institutional websites and documents that were much more contextual and specific to the mission of that institution (see the last bullet). However, when it comes to the question of how administrators and faculty members align learning outcome statements to the unique context of their college and university, institutions could benefit from more insight. Hutchings' (2016) occasional paper examining alignment of student learning outcomes offers practical suggestions and questions for thought. Northwest Indian College shows a graphical representation of its vertical alignment process. Notice its contextual foundation—Vision of the Ancestors. Mission- or institution-specific degree outcomes remains of value.



Figure 1. Northwest Indian College Institutional Outcomes.

2. *Learning is not exclusive to the classroom.* Yet in the review of ILOs—outcomes designed to be achieved from educational interactions throughout the institution—analysts saw no statements that referenced student affairs/co-curricula. Thus, as written, existing ILOs statements are written in ways that presume students only learn from the academic side of the institution. The DQP's areas of learning and accompanying statements are not exclusive to the classroom, in fact, it is assumed that the learning happens throughout the institution.
3. *There is a difference in ILOs by institutional type.* Community colleges were more likely to have program or degree specific learning outcomes, not learning outcome statements that are designed for the various functions and units across the institution at an institutional level. This finding may align well with the feedback from community colleges on the relevancy of the DQP to the various units of instruction (such as career and technical and continuing education). For example, Big Bend Community College embeds its ILOs in its Program Outcomes to assist with confusion between the terms.
4. *The DQP helps educators think about the totality of the degree with the fulsomeness of student experiences.* The aspirational nature of the integration and intentionality of the learning experience for students, to ensure that the entirety of the educational experience is comprised in the DEGREE requires additional attention and uplifting in messaging. A number of implementation and marketing resources were developed with the initial and revised versions of the DQP (see NILOA's Questions at Hand, DQP & Tuning). For instance, Alexandria Technical & Community College's website aligns its Marketing Program Outcomes with its General Learning

Outcomes as well as the DQP.

5. *Minority-Serving Institutions recognize and acknowledge ILOs that are contextual and mission specific.* We specifically looked at Minority-Serving Institutions (MSIs) to see if there were differences of note to inform the revision or finetune a focus on equity. If there were, we pulled their ILOs for further review. It is clear that MSIs, particularly TCUs and HBCUs are intentional and thoughtful in writing outcome statements related to its institutional context, mission, and/or student population.

One example is that of Haskell Indian Nations Universities Academic Catalog 2019-2020 where one of its ILOs emphasizes “Historical & Cultural Forces, where students will indentify, analyze, interpret, and evaluate historical and cultural forces and their implications. Students who complete these courses will be able to:

- apply an understanding of global, U.S., and Tribal histories, worldviews, beliefs, and values to contemporary social problems;
- identify contemporary political, social, environmental, educational, and spiritual tribal and intertribal issues;
- articulate the implications of multiculturalism, otherness, and the acceptance of differences;
- advocate for the sovereignty and self-determination of Indigenous peoples; and
- employ the principles of ethical and effective human interaction in communities and nations.”

In another example, Benedict College, a HBCU in South Carolina, states an ILO of Personal and Career Development where “students will demonstrate knowledge of college history, values, and resources”. Bethune-Cookman University outrightly states an ILO of The African American Experience where its “graduates demonstrate an understanding of the foundationa social, political, economic, and cultural role African Americans played in the development of the United States.”

In the box below, written by a former NILOA Research Analyst, the importance of context in writing learning outcome statements is addressed along with questions to help those wanting to practice writing more specific, actionable learning outcomes.

Discussion

Overall, we conclude from this review of existing institution-learning outcome statements that the DQP remains relevant and well aligned and that no additional areas of learning should be added. That said, there are tweaks that can be addressed. In addition, updating the areas to include current historical, political, and social contexts will assist in assuring the DQP’s relevancy³. Further, allowing space for institutions to add institution-specific ILOs is important specifically for MSIs.

That said, there are a few recommendations we will consider during the DQP revision process as a result of the analysis described in this report and includes:

1. Continue to implement a regular revision process of the DQP’s areas of learning and accompanying competencies for relevance and alignment.
2. Ensure DQP language is inclusive of learning in a variety of academic AND co-curricular settings.
3. Further exploration on terms that are inclusive and/or shared by different institutional types regarding ILOs and their alignment.
4. Recognizing that institutions need assistance to engage in the intentional integration of learning throughout the educational journey built into the design of the DQP, more should be done with marketing the DQP, especially in terms of the approaches, benefits, and timeliness of the framework.
5. Allow space for additional context-specific ILOs in the DQP process.

³ Later research activities in this revision process included blog posts written by the original authors and updates were made the DQP’s 5 areas of learning. Specifically, “Specialized Knowledge” now includes “Specialized/Industry Knowledge” and “Civic and Global Learning” expanded into “Civic/Democratic and Global Learning”.

An additional consideration in future iterations not tackled in this revision process is that of digital literacy. Early on we were posed with the question if a working group⁴ should be added to the other three and focused on digital literacy/fluency. It was concluded that since there was so much work on learning outcomes around digital literacy/fluency, a working group did not make sense. Additionally, none of our working groups were proficiency specific. If we had one proficiency group then the question could easily be raised, why not have more? However, we did conduct a brief webscan to see how institutions were talking about digital literacy/fluency and in examining national initiatives on digital literacy from librarians we felt recommendations could be made. In future revisions, this particular proficiency should be kept in mind.

Final Thoughts

The release of DQP 3.0 is in alignment with the 10 year anniversary of the beta DQP. We hope the revision process will reflect conversations currently happening across the higher education landscape as well as those conversations we have had with many stakeholders over the past 10 years and more specifically, since its last revision in 2014. To assist in maintaining its relevancy, the DQP should be revisited in future years to ensure consistency.

This report is coupled with additional data sources to assist NILOA in revising the DQP . In fact, the revision of the DQP unfolded through two additional approaches to the research on existing institution-level learning outcome statements:

1. Recommendations on possible revisions from working groups who did not see themselves or their issues addressed in the 2014 document.
2. Examination of associated learning frameworks and initiatives

The recommendations from the various groups and data sources were shared with Lumina and the remaining original DQP authors for their comment as final revisions were taking place⁵.

Since the release and implementation of the DQP, one question that steadily arises is “Can it stand the test of time?” It’s safe to say that it has for these past ten years and remains a relevant, forward-looking learning framework in the years to come. We continue to observe the institutional use and impact of the DQP nationally and hope that institutions see it for what is intended.

4 [The Birth and Growth of the DQP document](#) features information on the working groups.

5 See the NILOA website for the [revised 2021 DQP](#).

The Importance of Context: Guiding Questions for Writing Meaningful Student Learning Outcome Statements

Written by former NILOA Graduate Research Analyst, Dr. Terry Vaughn III

The following guiding questions and examples highlight how one's context within a higher education institution can play a significant role in the construction of outcome statements. Amid reoccurring advice to use correct verbs, having more concern about how one writes outcome statements with a context sensitive approach may enable the practice to be more meaningful to educators and students by allowing for their unique values and practices to have a role. Such meaningfulness may allow for more expressiveness when writing outcome statements. Thus, these guiding questions aim to help members of colleges and universities to establish and maintain a culture of assessment and fend off a potentially stifling compliance approach to writing outcome statements. Ideally, they can help to facilitate deeper discussion about writing learning outcome statements, discussions that includes considerations about model students, student demographics, non-ideal conditions, and the learning artifacts that emerge from institutional, program, and curricula/co-curricula experiences.

The following guiding questions aim to help administrators, faculty, student affairs professionals, and students to write and think about learning outcomes by contemplating: 1) the notion of model students, 2) the gravity of student demographics, 3) the pressure of non-ideal conditions facing an institution, and 4) the creation of learning artifacts from students during a learning experience.

<p>Question 1: Whom do you imagine as a model student that will emerge from your curricula, co-curricula, program or institutional experiences?</p>	<p>Rationale: When constructing a course or program, educators have some idea about what a successful student will look like once completing the experience. This idea of a successful student is what is meant by the notion of a model student. The importance of asking about the notion of a model student is to help 1) uncover hidden assumptions educators may have about student learning within some institutional context and 2) recognize how the notion of a model student will necessarily affect students' activities within a learning experience.</p>
<p>Question 2: How does the espoused notion(s) of a model student relate to the student demographics served by one's college or university?</p>	<p>Rationale: Questioning the relation between conceptions of model students and student demographics aims to help constituents reflect on how outcome statements complement and challenge the social and economic background of students. At the same time, the question turns a constructively critical perspective to held notions of model students, offering more opportunities for clearly articulated outcome statements.</p>
<p>Question 3: What are some of the non-ideal conditions that may affect the potential learning of curricula, co-curricula, program, or institutional experiences?</p>	<p>Rationale: By non-ideal, these factors can include organizational structures, lack of resources, and institutional location, among other factors. By reflecting on these non-ideal conditions potentially at different levels within an institution, greater clarity about the learning that may take place within a unique institutional context is possible. Equally important, coming to terms with such non-ideal factors may allow educators to express the limits of their learning experience, thus restricting the risk of overstating learning outcomes.</p>
<p>Question 4: What learning artifacts will students create within curricula, co-curricula, program, or institutional learning experiences?</p>	<p>Rationale: Learning artifacts may include types of papers (essays, literature reviews, poetry), presentations (mock job talks, teaching experience, research presentations), and documentations of learning (portfolios, journals, blogs) that may highlight what students can learn during an opportunity. Focusing on what potential artifacts will emerge enables one to improve their thinking about how their learning experience strives to fulfill the notion of an ideal student that operates behind the scenes.</p>

By pondering these four guiding questions, whether as literature to help facilitate an assessment committee meeting or while a faculty member crafts a syllabus or a student affairs professional designs a program, writing student learning outcome statements can be context sensitive.

Potential Benefits of These Guiding Questions

There are potential benefits of approaching the practice of writing outcome statements while reflecting on these guiding questions. One potential benefit is that these guiding questions allow for writing outcome statements to be viewed as an expression of what an educator believes his/her students ought to know within a unique learning experience. Furthermore, these guiding questions highlight how outcomes statements are arguments about student learning made by educators. In defending some underlying belief of a model student, each outcome statement operates as a premise where espoused outcomes and learning artifacts function as claims to student learning. Thus, while writing outcome statements is an expressive act on behalf of educators, it is also an argument.

These guiding questions also call for more thoughtfulness about the economic and social backgrounds of students. Outcome statements ought to relate to students' backgrounds in some positive, yet critical, manner. As such, a course, program, and institution are not operating in a vacuum absent of questions about race, class, and gender, among other categories. Rather, learning outcomes exists among these social meanings and thus outcome statements need to be responsive to this these factors.

Lastly, with these guiding questions comes the understanding that outcome statements are ultimately student-focused. From conception to final versions of outcome statements, writing outcome statements focuses on student growth more than any other factor. Thus, these guiding questions seek to promote a student-focused approach that includes appreciating the unique context of an institution.

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- *We want to acknowledge the following colleges that were referenced in this paper: Alexandria Technical & Community College, Benedict College, Bethune-Cookman University, Big Bend Community College, Haskell Indian Nations University, and Northwest Indian College.