REFINING PROGRAM LEARNING OUTCOMES
USEFUL TIPS & GUIDING PRINCIPLES

WHY DO PROGRAM LEARNING OUTCOMES MATTER?

The purpose of program learning outcomes is to guide the design of a program, and to ensure that students leave with the knowledge, skills, and habits of mind that the program promises. Program learning outcomes work best when they are formulated to facilitate program assessment. Hence, it is recommended that program learning outcomes be specific to your program yet limited in number. To communicate succinctly the uniqueness of your program and streamline its assessment and continual improvement plan, it is important to refine your program learning outcomes.

Best practices recommend a range of **8 of 12 program learning outcomes**. If a program has more than that, it is likely the result of having compiled course learning outcomes together, instead of having developed overarching program learning outcomes under which course learning outcomes align.

WHAT IS THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN PROGRAM LEARNING OUTCOMES AND COURSE LEARNING OUTCOMES?

Course learning outcomes are "the ingredients" of program learning outcomes. They consist of the knowledge, skills, and habits of minds that are developed and achieved in your courses. Course learning outcomes are developed throughout the program. They are aligned to program learning outcomes, but they have a narrower focus, concentrated at the course level.

Program learning outcomes are "the dish" that the individual ingredients (course learning outcomes) make up when prepared and integrated. With program learning outcomes you want to capture cumulative knowledge, skills, and habits of mind that students achieve across courses at the end of your program.

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EXAMPLES

Course Learning Outcomes:
- Describe the seven steps of the research process when writing a paper
- Write a clear critique using the three methods introduced
- Write a clear well-structured essay providing sound argumentation and reliable evidence.

Corresponding Program Learning Outcome:
- Write using clear, well-structured, well-argued prose, using sound argumentation, effective supporting evidence, and a strong synthesis of points

HOW DO YOU WRITE PROGRAM LEVEL OUTCOMES?

1. Identify the skills you want students to learn in your program.

2. Synthesize these into 8-12 program level outcomes that capture the cumulative knowledge, skills, or habits of mind for each theme.

3. Draft 8-12 program learning outcomes based on these themes. Program learning outcomes usually consist of three parts: An action verb, based on Bloom's Revised Taxonomy, the skill you want students to have, and any relevant disciplinary context.

   Note: In Bloom's taxonomy, there are six levels of learning: remembering, understanding, applying, analyzing, evaluating, and creating. It's important to choose the appropriate level of learning, because this directly influences the type of assessment you choose to measure your students' learning. At the program level, most outcomes will be at an advanced level that requires the student to actively use their knowledge.

   a) Select an action verb that is observable to describe the behaviour at the appropriate level (see this link for suggestions).

   b) Clearly identify the skills (e.g., synthesizing information, giving an oral or written presentation, creating a policy brief, etc.).

   c) Spell out relevant

   d) Combine the relevant sentence fragments from steps 4-6. A final program level outcome might be "By the end of the program, students will be able to generate maps from spatial data using ArcGIS and R.")

   e) Repeat this process for the remaining program level outcomes.

4. Seek feedback from faculty members and incorporate their input.

TIPS FOR REFINING PROGRAM LEVEL OUTCOMES

1. **Vision first.** Set aside your current program learning outcomes, and consider what the ideal attributes of graduates of your program are. What are the necessary knowledge, skills, and habits of mind your graduates should have by the end of your program? What distinguishes your program from other programs? What are the strengths your faculty complement brings to the program? This differentiation may take into account the institution (York), your students, and your faculty research areas.

2. **Zoom out.** If your program learning outcomes are a compilation of course learning outcomes, you will want to zoom out to get the big picture of your program and how all of the parts

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(course learning outcomes) fit together. Identify which outcomes connect to one another, and consider writing a "summary" outcome that captures the cumulative knowledge, skills, or habits of mind that encompass these related outcomes.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Barrette, C. (n.d.). Course vs. program learning outcomes: Analogies and examples [PowerPoint slides]. Retrieved September 6, 2022 from https://tinyurl.com/s7pzer3p

Ontario Universities Council on Quality Assurance (n.d.). Program objectives and program-level learning outcomes. Retrieved September 6, 2022 from https://tinyurl.com/5n9bacva

University of Toronto Centre for Teaching Support & Innovation (n.d.). Developing learning outcomes. Retrieved September 6, 2022 from https://tinyurl.com/46w8c7ve

Western University Centre for Teaching and Learning (n.d.). Writing program level learning outcomes. Retrieved September 6, 2022 from https://tinyurl.com/mweahmju

Would you like to learn more?

Contact us at Teaching Commons for additional resources, handouts, applications, courses, workshops, examples, advice, assistance, one-on-one consulting, and everything else related to teaching and learning. We are happy and eager to assist you!

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