

Celebrating Outcomes and Cultivating Assessments

How the Largest College Found Common Ground

A CLASSIC COMING-OF-AGE ritual in Latin culture is the *quinceañera*, an elaborate fifteenth birthday celebration held to announce the arrival of a young woman. The *quinceañera* not only honors girls for having attained a certain level of maturity, but it also raises expectations for their further development and prosperous futures. Miami Dade College recently held a similar celebration for a set of youthful ideals that have, metaphorically, moved out of the faculty house. Spelled out in a new set of learning outcomes (see p. 32), these ideals are expected to raise levels of achievement and awareness throughout the college.

On October 19, 2007, students and faculty signed a covenant of engagement with ten outcomes that had been adopted the previous year. A wide range of interested parties gathered in Miami's Freedom Tower to pledge their support, including the leadership of the college, the president and CEO of the Greater Miami Chamber of Commerce, and U.S. Under Secretary of Education Sara Martinez Tucker. Fittingly, we were surrounded by history and art. Listed on the National Register of Historic Places, the golden Freedom Tower is a beacon of hope well known for welcoming Cuban refugees in the 1960s—myself included—and at the time of our event, it was hosting a landmark exhibition of etchings by Francisco de Goya. Thus did the event itself evoke learning outcomes five and nine, which address diverse cultures and aesthetics, respectively.

Like the etchings on the walls, the Miami Dade College Learning Outcomes are becoming etched and framed in our collective mind. They are also taking root in every course. For

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The Miami Dade College Learning Outcomes help define what our institution stands for, and they demonstrate our commitment to the core values of a liberal education



Miami Dade College Learning Outcomes

Purpose: Through the academic disciplines and cocurricular activities, Miami Dade College provides multiple, varied, and intentional learning experiences to facilitate the acquisition of fundamental knowledge and skills and the development of attitudes that foster effective citizenship and lifelong learning.

As graduates of Miami Dade College, students will be able to

1. communicate effectively using listening, speaking, reading, and writing skills;
2. use quantitative analytical skills to evaluate and process numerical data;
3. solve problems using critical and creative thinking and scientific reasoning;
4. formulate strategies to locate, evaluate, and apply information;
5. demonstrate knowledge of diverse cultures, including global and historical perspectives;
6. create strategies that can be used to fulfill personal, civic, and social responsibilities;
7. demonstrate knowledge of ethical thinking and its application to issues in society;
8. use computer and emerging technologies effectively;
9. demonstrate an appreciation for aesthetics and creative activities;
10. describe how natural systems function and recognize the impact of humans on the environment.

(Related Web site: www.mdc.edu/gened)

example, students taking Biology and Environment with Professor Chris Migliaccio receive an extensive syllabus, a course study guide, and a chart of what he calls “Gen Ed Vitamins” that delineates how the ten learning outcomes align with the objectives and enriching activities of the course. “There is nothing in the outcomes

that I don’t cover,” Migliaccio explains. “These are like survival skills, because our world is so interconnected. I didn’t have that paradigm when I was a student.” He is pleased when finishing students describe the course’s effect on them as a “paradigm shift.”

Although the integration of the outcomes into all of our two thousand courses will take some time, we still can celebrate our achievements thus far. Articulating and refining an ongoing discussion that has spanned decades, our very large and very diverse system has agreed—within the relatively short time frame of two years—on what we want graduating students to know. This agreement dovetails with our current effort to identify more authentic and effective methods of measuring what our graduating students have learned. Perhaps our example will inspire others: if the largest undergraduate institution in the nation can do it, then others can too—and on their own terms.

Intentionality

Our quest began with high expectations all around, for our staff as well as for our students. As a result of our open admissions policy, some of our students have a longer, more remedial educational journey than others. But still we expect all students to be truly educated and truly prepared to succeed by the time they graduate. The clear articulation of specific learning outcomes ensures that everyone knows exactly what we mean by a Miami Dade College education.

Although our college is uniquely large and diverse, our process for developing outcomes and assessments is not enigmatic. It has involved the keywords of collaboration, persistence, and democracy. A democratic process is paramount at a place with more than two hundred programs of study, eight campuses, and a majority of minority students and faculty; but democracy also works in smaller, more homogenous villages.

Just as visualizing success is a proven method for elite business leaders and athletes, intentionality is very important in education. Our process for developing outcomes and subsequent assessments has been full of intention at each step, and this mentality mirrors the consciousness we want to see in the work of our faculty and students. The process itself models the outcomes.

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When students and faculty work intentionally toward the same goals, we raise the consciousness of our entire system and move together toward what the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) calls “an invigorated and practical liberal education” (2002, x–xi). Although expert consultants have proven very useful, we have not been looking to outsiders to tell us where to go; we are looking within. We believe in our faculty and in our ability to prepare students for personal and professional growth in the twenty-first century.

Miami Dade College has a large cohort of students with limited proficiency in English.

Do we want these students to grow in areas other than language skills, and if so, how? In a remedial reading class taught by Isabel Rodriguez-Dehmer, cochair of the Learning Outcomes Coordinating Council,

the students participate in a Habitat for Humanity project in an impoverished neighborhood. “This is something they normally wouldn’t do, but it really connected them to the college,” says Rodriguez-Dehmer, who collaborated on the project with the student services division. “We’ve hooked them to work harder and be part of our community.” This project follows from outcome six—“create strategies that can be used to fulfill



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personal, civic, and social responsibilities”—yet it also delves into other outcomes such as communication and ethical thinking. As this example demonstrates, even courses with narrow and specific focuses can function on multiple levels.

The process

Every good organization is guided by a mission statement, and our engagement with outcomes has been a college-wide attempt to further emphasize “the learner’s needs” identified in ours. We asked the business community and alumni as well as our community of teachers and learners, what should a student have gained by completing a course of study at Miami Dade College?

At the dawn of the millennium, even broader questions drove an expansion of our mission statement into a strategic plan for the years 2004–10. The plan challenges us to make progress in five major areas: access to the college, student achievement and success, serving the community, resource development and allocation, and employees and the college. The establishment of learning outcomes is among the priorities included under the second of these major areas. Moreover, the idea of assessment is articulated in this guiding document as a means “to continue to uncover meaningful methods of measuring student learning.” The will for reform was there.

Our college had been grappling with these issues for years, but in 2005—just as state, regional, and federal commissions were questioning the level of accountability in higher education and the national dialogue was developing—a campuswide movement coalesced. When they returned from an AAC&U institute, the members of our general education team inspired the faculty with their conviction that our outcomes needed to be reformed, and they developed a purpose statement for “intentional learning experiences” that “foster effective citizenship and lifelong learning.” The statement makes it clear that, for us, learning is deliberate, goal-oriented, and continuous, and it laid the foundation for the list of outcomes that followed.

We did not preordain a “top ten” list. The list evolved from a community-wide dialogue that took place in workshops, committees, and the hallways of our campuses across the county. Local businesses and alumni as well as current

students and staff took part in surveys and focus groups. Certainly other configurations of the outcomes may have been acceptable, but their wording is truly ours. The Miami Dade College Learning Outcomes help define what our institution stands for, and they demonstrate our commitment to the core values of a liberal education.

Assessment

In November and December 2006, just a month after the ten outcomes were formally adopted, a preliminary round of new assessments was administered. Instead of relying on standardized tests, we developed a series of scenario-based, authentic tasks that address multiple learning outcomes. For example, some students were challenged to write about a proposed offshore oil drilling operation. How well could they express their concerns? Among other outcomes, this task addressed environmental issues, ethics, and communication skills. Other tasks involved speaking in public, deciphering graphs, and appreciating art. In addition, one outcome was assessed using a commercial test of computer skills.

Before the process of creating these assessments began, a committee established the rules of engagement. The committee members agreed that the primary purpose was to establish a broad portrait of our graduating class that could be used for making year-to-year comparisons and for making decisions about the current curriculum. In essence, we developed a unique internal process based on the understanding that one test could not fit all purposes, and periodic review would be necessary to hone the tasks.

Results were grouped into four broad skill levels: emerging, developing, proficient, and exemplary. The results of the preliminary round of assessment were not particularly surprising—we know our students fairly well—and they reinforced reforms already underway. What we really learned is that our young and diverse institution is capable of reaching agreement, growing together, and uniting around our students. The process was team- and faculty-driven, and like a hybrid vehicle, it created its own energy.

Lessons learned

The assessment process has taught us at least four important lessons. First, consistent and open communication about the process is imperative

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for gaining both faculty buy-in and administrative support, and faculty-led discussions are particularly effective in this regard. Second, students need more in-class opportunities to become familiar with performance-based assessments: tasks to assess various learning outcomes should be incorporated into each course. Third, external expert review and internal vigilance are both necessary in order to validate the process and to avoid grading bias and unreliability. Fourth, an exploration of the use of technology to streamline the entire process would benefit the college.

An unprecedented, college-wide effort is now underway to map the entire curriculum over the next two years. We are challenging all faculty and all disciplines to weave the learning outcomes and relevant assessments into their coursework. In the long run, every course in every discipline must demonstrate how it addresses the ten learning outcomes. Although our administration is also united in this vision, the effort is truly faculty-driven. Only the faculty can bring the outcomes to life.

On stage with me at the learning outcomes covenant signing event last October were several other presidents: the presidents of our campus student government associations, the president of the faculty union, and the president of the Greater Miami Chamber of Commerce. Each had—and retains—a place at the table. The representatives of this alliance pledged “to become intentional learners” and to “intentionally address the learning outcomes and actively engage students.” Although we can celebrate great strides in this direction, we recognize that our college, and society as a whole, still has a lot of work to do. □

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REFERENCE

Association of American Colleges and Universities. 2002. *Greater expectations: A new vision for learning as a nation goes to college*. Washington, DC: Association of American Colleges and Universities.



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