Learning Outcomes——Sybil Priebe, Editor of “TYCA to You”

Back in July, a TYCA rep responded to my request for TYCA-to-You topics with the following: “Another possible topic—on my mind this summer—it seems we are constantly revising learning outcomes at the state level, to streamline, to make them more measurable, to realign them with this and that. I’d be interested—if we haven’t covered it yet—in knowing how often general education and/or course-level outcomes get revised, who revises them, and how, and for what reasons in other regions.”

So, here’s a little recap (thanks to my colleague, Ronda Marman) of what our little—but mighty—state of North Dakota does:

• The committee that reviews the standards meets every 5–7 years and is made up of North Dakota math and English teachers and the Department of Public Instruction. The instructors involved submit applications and are reviewed and ranked according to their experience in standards and curriculum development.

• The revisions that are coming into the NDUS system (see “First Draft of New Math, English Standards,” https://www.nd.gov/dpi/SchoolStaff/ICR/press_releases/FirstDraftofNewMathEnglishStandards/), involving more input from educators, seem to have a more favorable reception—to date. The general education outcomes at the college level seem to be in line with the national expectations; however, there will always be room for improvement.

• The Vertical Alignment group (2013–2014) was one of the state’s initiatives that had the right motivation; however, they let outside interests control it. The current model—taking applications from experienced persons within the field—seems much more promising. However, I think that future reviews will have to occur in a shorter time frame to accommodate the fluidity of our society and technological changes that modify the framework of the learning environment.
• These new standards have not yet been released; however, the notes I reviewed from those sessions shows that the recommendation that was most heatedly discussed within the Vertical Alignment committee was in regard to research and documentation and students’ ability to understand and use professional-level sources—and properly document them. This is an ongoing issue in a society where multiple forms of social networking not only use but also propagate using personal opinion and belief in lieu of factual or expert information.

The North Dakota University System has also implemented a LEAP Initiative (see “LEAP Initiative/General Education, https://www.ndus.edu/system/councils/academic-affairs/leap-initiative-general-education/), which other colleges may or may not have mentioned in their reporting:

• A national initiative, LEAP champions the value of liberal education for individual students and for a nation dependent on economic creativity and democratic vitality. The initiative focuses campus practice on fostering essential learning outcomes for all students, whatever their chosen field of study.

• LEAP seeks to engage the public with core questions about what really matters in college; give students a compass to guide their learning; make a set of essential learning outcomes the preferred framework for educational excellence and assessment of learning; and create new alignments between educational secondary and higher education.

If you have a topic you’d like us to report back on, please feel free to shoot it my way.

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**TYCA-Southwest Report from Erin O'Neill Armendarez**

Texas, by far the largest state in the TYCA-SW region, has common learning outcomes for some of the courses most often taught in the state’s colleges and universities, including some general education writing courses. The state’s higher education board has developed an Academic Course Guide Manual (ACGM) that lists required outcomes for these courses and the common course descriptions. Campuses must cover all learning outcomes listed in the ACGM but are free to add additional outcomes that serve specific local needs. Instructors in English seem happy with this system for the most part; however, those set on teaching Composition II exclusively from literature “have issues” with the common outcomes. One TYCA-SW member from Texas would like to see the state align the first-year writing courses more carefully with WPA outcomes and believes the most important outcome in writing for students is to “be able to construct a good English sentence.”

New Mexico has a list of general education core competencies divided into five main areas including Communications and Humanities. Currently, upon request of the provosts of the state’s four-year colleges and universities, a statewide
task force made up of administrators, faculty, and staff from various campuses is redrafting these competencies to streamline them and to bring them up to date. In addition, the state intends to set common numbers for general education courses across all campuses. For courses with common numbers, 80% of the student learning outcomes will be the same. Currently, subcommittees in English and math are reviewing course syllabi from around the state. NMHED staff and graduate students are working on sorting and classifying learning outcomes; faculty may go online and review, discuss, and make changes to the outcomes as the work progresses.

A colleague from Oklahoma reports that Oklahoma has no common general education outcomes, but her campus is creating a subcouncil of faculty from across general education disciplines that will develop common learning outcomes for core courses. For her campus, this is new, so no one knows yet what the final outcome will be.

Likewise, a colleague from Louisiana reports that the state has no general education outcomes; however, it does have common outcomes for developmental classes. Louisiana has common course descriptions for core courses, and at the college level faculty are responsible for writing and revising learning outcomes as needed. Our reporting Louisianan believes students should definitely be able to successfully “write about different perspectives of the same event.”

Members from Arkansas and Colorado did not respond to the query on general education learning outcomes before the publication deadline. However, higher education department websites for both states list general education courses guaranteed to transfer everywhere in their states. These courses often have different titles and numbers, and no explicit outcomes are mentioned. The Arkansas Course Transfer System (ACTS) website explains that faculty across the state determine which courses meet intended general education learning outcomes in a particular core area.

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TYCA-West Report from Stephanie Maenhardt

Many instructors have a love/hate relationship with the idea of student learning outcomes, or SLOs. We love the idea because we are devoted to our students and want to do whatever we can to help them succeed in our classes and outside of school, too. However, for the individuals who are directly charged with presenting and carrying out learning outcomes in our classrooms, SLOs can also be a frustrating concept, especially when said outcomes are mandated from a higher power, and we have little say in what they are or how and why they are selected.

In speaking with instructors from around the TYCA-West region, I discovered that there is broad spectrum of understanding when it comes to statewide
learning outcomes. Some instructors felt very well educated on SLOs and statewide expectations, while others were unsure of the process. In the second situation noted here, that of the dissatisfied instructor, there were always detailed outcomes in place at a school and departmental level; however, there was minimal transparency on information coming from outside of their actual college.

One instructor from Utah noted that while SLOs are frequently discussed within her school and department, she has “no idea how often the state revises its general education outcomes for higher ed” or even “who does the revising.” Her comments suggest the need for greater transparency. If states could open the doors of communication here and keep teachers informed, making sure that they are aware of the process for selecting statewide learning outcomes and also when and how said outcomes are revised, it would be much easier to incorporate these ideas into their course curriculum.

It’s important to note that questions with transparency and awareness of an SLO decision-making process differ from state to state. An instructor in Arizona noted that his state’s task force meets yearly, but that they don’t necessarily “rewrite outcomes.” This was, instead, the purview of each individual “community college district [and] university.” Between these institutions, instructors work together to make sure that the proposed SLOs articulate; however, not every instructor has the opportunity to serve on this statewide committee. It’s up to the task force to disseminate important SLO information to individual schools and instructors.

Another instructor from Arizona added more detail to the discussion, commenting on the importance of ongoing conversations between different articulation task forces. These subject-area specific groups are composed of educators at both two-year and four-year schools throughout the state and meet annually to discuss “general education courses in that area.” Additionally, individual courses in each subject area undergo reviews throughout the year to make sure the content is in line with the designated SLOs.

Regardless of an instructor’s degree of involvement in determining statewide learning outcomes or even his or her knowledge that such outcomes exist, we can agree on the importance and benefit of having ambitious and achievable goals in place for our courses and students.

Referencing the WPA Outcomes Statement, one instructor noted that while all of the outcomes listed in the document are important in their own ways, “the one that seems so crucial as a life skill is learning to adapt messages to meet the needs of specific audiences for specific purposes and for specific occasions.” Indeed, critical thinking and adaptability are highly transferrable actions that students can carry not just from assignment to assignment, or from course to course, but from the classroom into work and life activities outside of school. When this occurs, an outcome has definitely been achieved.

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TYCA-Midwest Report from Suzanne Labadie

Greetings from the Midwest! This edition of “TYCA to You” caused a moment of pause for many of us in the region. My colleague Galen Leonhardt put it well: “The topic is not exactly foreign to me, but it is not something I’ve spent much time contemplating.” I would say the same. The day to day of a two-year college instructor’s life is regularly occupied with students, pedagogy, reading, and grading, so that we rarely come up for air, some of us.

After completing research and polling TYCA-MW membership, it turns out that few of the states in the Midwest have statewide outcomes for general education at the postsecondary level that are actively enforced or familiar to faculty. Most schools take into account the changes to high school-level curriculum and the ability of students to transfer their credits from the two-year college to wherever they’d like to continue their work. Rarely, however, do these two priorities include prescribed general education outcomes.

Assessment is still a central endeavor for instructors and is commonly associated with HLC accreditation. In this context, schools are concerned with creating or maintaining general education outcomes, and common course outcomes, and demonstrating evidence of assessment internally at institutional, departmental, and individual levels. That said, most faculty in the Midwest report the creation of outcomes in collaboration with other college faculty, particularly in their discipline.

Because most of these schools work at a local level, rather than statewide, changes to the existing outcomes would certainly be simpler to make without having to knock on the doors of legislators or external committee members. Even so, guidelines provided by the HLC stress that general education outcomes and the associated measurement tools are not meant to be fluid documents but should remain static and consistent so as to ensure that we are able to more effectively measure student learning. As such, the process for changing outcomes—beyond simple wordsmithing—can be long and drawn out. This is a sensible approach, but it does make responsive pedagogy somewhat more difficult than instructors might prefer. Indiana, a state that does in fact have GE outcomes, updated their outcomes in 2013 and gave schools two years to implement those changes by 2015. A slow moving machine indeed.

I am grateful that schools in Michigan and elsewhere in the region are able to create their general education outcomes based upon the expertise of faculty teaching in the disciplines. It is certainly not lost on me that many other institutions have outcomes handed down to them from other organizations and legislators. On the other hand, it does mean that colleges must independently pursue the sometimes hard-to-find research on what is happening at other colleges in the state. Whether instated by the government or not, alignment with other institutions in the state on the essential learning outcomes of a college education is an important aspect of a college’s integrity.
It would be helpful, I think, to have more dialogue about the GE outcomes that we are working with across the state. If it were possible for schools to maintain autonomy to create outcomes that suit their students and also achieve collaboration between colleges, that would be ideal. Of course, without the enforcement of legislators or some other governing body, projects like this are often a “nice idea” rather than something that truly creates change and improvement.

What remains clear is that faculty in the Midwest are committed to a few things above all else: effective communication in writing, critical thinking, readings skills, and a sense of one’s place in a rapidly changing global society.

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**TYCA-Southeast Report from Susan Slavicz**

Community colleges in the Southeastern region have varying processes to decide and revise general education outcomes. In Florida, there is no standard time period for those revisions. In Mississippi, Gaye Winter notes that the process of reviewing the standards is usually linked to visits by SACS, our accreditation agency.

Nancy Webster, associate vice president of arts and sciences and articulation at Florida State College at Jacksonville, noted that several years ago committees of Florida faculty from the Florida College System and State University System met to construct the general education core for each of the five general education areas for students entering the system. A driving factor for this revision was to reduce the number of required hours. Charles Smires noted that changes in the number of hours required in Florida and the assigned categories have been guided by trying to speed up degree completion and to emphasize degree course focus as opposed to general education. Ultimately, financial concerns seem to lie behind all of the decisions.

Kathleen Ciez-Volz, executive dean for academic foundations at FSCJ, added that a statewide committee informs the work of a General Education Review (GER) committee at individual institutions like FSCJ. The GER committee, in turn, works closely with general education disciplinary councils/committees whose members review course outlines and course learning outcome assessment forms to ensure currency and relevancy of the curricula and to provide feedback about the adoption and implementation of global general education learning outcomes relative to the specific discipline/courses.

In Florida we also have Statewide General Education outcome areas that differ from the general education requirements: Communication, Critical Thinking, Scientific and Quantitative Reasoning, Information Literacy, and Global Sociocultural Responsibility. In my discussions with faculty, critical thinking invariably gets mentioned most often as the emphasis of every discipline. I have increasingly emphasized the importance of critical thinking in my writing courses and particularly feel that with the influx of dual enrollment students this piece must be in place.
Faculty who responded to the questions for this article had no complaints about the process. Most of the time faculty are involved in setting the outcomes and standards. However, Florida’s emphasis upon saving money and time by reducing the number of general education requirements did sometimes impact the availability of certain courses. For instance, the introduction to literature courses have been designated as humanities courses, which, at least at my college, meant fewer students taking the classes.

General education outcomes appear to be tied to accreditation processes in most instances. Individual schools are required, during accreditation, to examine their outcomes and to at least determine their adequacy. States’ concerns with general education requirements, however, seem to be much more tied to money issues than to the quality of students’ education.

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TYCA-Northeast Report from Leigh Jonaitis

As is likely the case at many institutions, the states of the Northeast have different approaches in terms of statewide general education outcomes. For example, general education outcomes in Connecticut are ostensibly determined by individual institutions. However, since the 12 community colleges and the 5 state universities (excluding the University of Connecticut) combined several years ago under a single system, they have undergone a rigorous Transfer and Articulation Policy process that aligns institutions in a competency-based gen ed core. There is still autonomy for individual institutions, but the outcomes of each competency area were developed by a team made up of representatives of all 17 institutions and vetted and voted on by each institution. As Jeff Partridge of Capital Community College explains, the process “has been messy in many respects, but that is understandable given the scope of the project. Looking back, I’m not convinced that the competency-based system for gen ed is viable. I feel like the result is essentially still a course-based system with a lot of competency jargon. That said, I do feel that taking a close look at the competencies we want students to learn and codifying those competency outcomes more specifically in course outlines has strengthened our course outlines. The next question, of course, is whether individual faculty are really teaching to these new outcomes or just doing what they have always done. That is the challenge at the campus level.”

In September 2008, New Jersey signed into law a Comprehensive Statewide Transfer Agreement. This agreement, which is also known as the Lampitt Law, is designed to facilitate a smooth transfer from a New Jersey community college to the New Jersey public four-year colleges and universities. The agreement provides for full transfer of the associate in arts (AA) and associate in science (AS) degree credits for community college graduates. In supporting this legislation, Kelly Bender
of Passaic Community College explains that most in the state are certainly in favor of protecting students from losing credits, courses, and time as they transfer from community colleges to state colleges. However, she along with many others are skeptical of these mandates and outcomes being “created” somewhere at the state level and then delivered “down” to community colleges. At Bergen Community College, a committee that includes the deans of assessment, vice presidents of institutional effectiveness, members of the faculty senate/union, and representatives from a variety of departments revises the gen ed outcomes. The committee evaluates the language and aligns outcomes with the vision, values, and mission of NJ colleges. The main reason is to sustain regional accreditation and to keep current with national requirements and trends.

In Pennsylvania, general education outcomes are developed by the individual colleges, not the state. Dr. Charlie Groth of Bucks County Community College explains: “We’re free to revise our Gen Ed program when and as we wish. Practically speaking, however, we make decisions based on likelihood of transfer and recommendations from our regional accreditation body (Middle States). ‘Likelihood of transfer’ would include attention to the transfer frameworks at the state level. We are not required to follow this framework, but it is to our students’ advantage that we do. In addition to the state-level transfer framework, we are concerned with transfer to the places our students are most likely to transfer to, which may or may not match the state framework.”

Perhaps not surprisingly, all those surveyed seemed to feel that the most important gen ed outcomes revolve around writing and communication. As we know, successful students must be able to communicate effectively in reading, writing, and speaking, as well as exhibit independent, informed, critical observation and problem solving. Identifying these goals in general education outcomes on a statewide level is a priority for TYCA-NE members.

**Thank you to the following for their contributions to this report:**

Jeff Partridge of Capital Community College, Kelly Bender of Passaic County Community College, Iris Bucchino of Bergen Community College, Patrick Moore of Hudson County Community College, and Charlie Groth of Bucks County Community College.

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**TYCA-Pacific Northwest Report from Teresa Thonney**

I asked Pacific Northwest TYCA members to tell me about their statewide general education learning outcomes for higher education: who revises them; how happy faculty are with them; and which outcomes they considered most important for students to achieve. Here’s what I learned from faculty in my region.

In Oregon, general education outcomes are revised by the Higher Education Advisory Committee,
although the outcomes have been revised only once in the past 20 years. The state has no authority to force compliance among the 17 independent community colleges in Oregon, so change happens slowly. The outcomes themselves are described by one faculty member as “confusing and vague,” closer to guidelines than they are outcomes and created with little input from educators.

The faculty I heard from in Idaho and Montana expressed greater satisfaction with their states’ general education outcomes and the process followed for revising them. In Idaho, state-level outcomes are revised by faculty representatives from each public higher education institution (community colleges, technical colleges, and universities). Discipline groups meet annually to review and revise the outcomes if necessary, and the state board must then approve any changes. Changes are perhaps easier to implement in Idaho than in Oregon because of the state’s size: there are only three state universities, one four-year college, three community colleges, and one technical college.

Montana has a general education transfer agreement among its community, tribal, and publicly funded colleges and universities, which is overseen by a General Education Council composed of members from the various colleges and universities. It is the role of this council to manage and maintain the courses that make up the Montana University System Core. The General Education Council is responsible for overseeing and approving revisions to the outcomes. In general, faculty believe the outcomes meet the requirements of a strong general education curriculum.

In Alaska, there are no state-level student learning outcomes. There is, however, ongoing discussion at the four-year higher education level about bringing into alignment the general education requirements at the various MAUs (main academic units) in the statewide system. Washington State also has no statewide student learning outcomes. The Washington State Board for Community and Technical Colleges requires that applied undergraduate degree and certificate programs include related instruction or general education with outcomes in communication, computation, and human relations; but this requirement is based on standards from the Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities, not state-level outcomes. A state board has fiscal and policy authority but is not involved with curriculum setting, which is instead locally controlled by each college. That there is no “master plan” for higher education at the state level in Washington could be considered either a weakness or strength, depending on one’s point of view.

Not surprisingly, writing instructors from throughout the region identify learning how to write appropriately for the situation and critical thinking as the most important outcomes for students to achieve.

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