

Improving the Outcomes for College Students Transferring to University

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The authors discuss the challenges of transferring from college to university programs. Following consideration of the practices associated with transferring credits and creating articulation agreements, the authors suggest the use of learning outcomes. Noting the challenges, as well as the benefits, they propose using learning outcomes as an alternative to existing transfer practices. Continued collaborative research and planning efforts between colleges and universities are stated as being essential to improving the transfer process.

Introduction

This essay considers the use of learning outcomes as a way of improving the results for college students seeking admission to four-year university programs. Both colleges and universities face issues involving the transfer of credits from colleges to universities. Colleges deliver two- and three-year diploma programs with applied focuses, while four-year university programs place their emphasis on the development of theory and research skills. Upon graduation from college or after gaining work experience, students often aspire to raise their professional status by seeking to obtain a four-year university degree. This process frequently results in frustration due to confusing transfer policies and disappointing transfer

credit results. The policies and processes that are employed in transferring credits from college to university programs clearly needs improvement, and using learning outcomes presents a viable alternative.

Confusing and Frustrating Transfer Policies

When moving from high school to institutions of higher learning, students often choose colleges over universities because they view colleges as a stepping-stone into universities. Colleges often have more affordable tuition levels, require lower grades for

admission, are geographically more accessible (Andres, 2001), and offer the opportunity for part-time studies (Cohen, 2005). In addition, students may see college education as a clearer path into the employment market. Universities recognize the academic achievement of college students by offering transfer credits. Students wishing to transfer to universities experience frustration when the transfer credits offered by universities differ between institutions and programs. Some of the reasons for these confusing inconsistencies are:

- Four year university programs specify that entering high school students must have completed a set number of advanced-level high school credits on entrance to university. When a college student is found to lack these high school credits, the university uses the student's college credits to fill this gap (Bell, 1998).
- Degrees obtained from some specific institutions result in lower levels of credits because their degrees are considered to have less value (Marshall, 2005/2006). For example, in Canada, where colleges are not members of the Association of Colleges and Universities in Canada, students receive fewer transfer credits.
- Colleges viewed as technical schools result in lower transfer rates (Cohen, 2003). However, higher rates result when universities perceive colleges to be feeder schools (Cohen, 2005).
- Individuals who worked in their field between college graduation and their return to university often experience obstacles when transferring credits. For example, many of these individuals did not take the needed college courses for a successful transfer to a four-year institution (Knoell, 1996; Findlen, 1997/1998).

Even in institutions with strong transfer policies, students report improper implementation of those policies. Some universities continue to favour their current undergraduate students by using enrolment caps and asking college transfer students to reapply to the institution in order to continue their studies.

In addition, universities deny credits based on college reputation rather than on articulation policy (Moodie, 2007).

The Role of Articulation Agreements

Articulation plays a key role in resolving transfer inconsistencies. Thompson (2003) defines articulation as “the process of formally defining how course credit and/or programs earned at one institution will be applied towards credit and/or a degree from another institution” (p. 4). Whether or not a college student transferring to university receives advanced standing depends on assessing the student's college credits against the courses applicable to his or her university program. All Canadian post-secondary institutions use transfer agreements. However, only British Columbia and Alberta have developed province-wide councils with transparent policies that promote mobility between colleges and universities (British Columbia Council on Admissions and Transfer, 2003; Dennison, 2000). The Council has also developed procedures such as online transfer guides that hold institutional articulation committees more accountable for their actions.

Despite some improvements, Andres (2001) found that many students seeking transfers continue to experience confusion. Students report that information provided by universities is inaccurate, inconsistent, out-of-date, overwhelming, and that it often results in miscommunication. As in Canada, many universities in the United States reject credits from colleges even though many of the college courses are comparable to university courses (Miller, 2007). Rejection may occur despite comparable course content, use of the same textbooks, having a teaching faculty with similar qualifications, and providing similar learning experiences. To address these confusing transfer practices, Cohen (2003, 2005) suggested a further simplification of the transfer process for students who begin their post-secondary studies in college and then transfer to university. Handel (2007) suggests that the achievement of a successful transfer from college to university depends on the following:

- setting up suitable university preparatory courses and encouraging college students to focus on a major at an early stage in their education;
- communicating the positive aspects of successful transfers, such as financial aid and equal college and university student performance over four years of study;
- educating student advisors about transfer policies and procedures;
- carrying out articulation policies that help most students;
- giving college applicants priority in admissions;
- setting goals for college students, and addressing the needs of transfer students;
- establishing and promoting a ‘transfer-going’ culture;
- simplifying joint admission that increases access to university and raises the reputation of the colleges that open opportunities to share facilities (Knoell, 1996);
- considering past work experience as a basis for credit transfer; and
- creating a more collaborative model of articulation.

Using Learning Outcomes in the Transfer Process

Learning outcomes have great potential for assisting the transfer process. There have been a number of approaches for defining learning outcomes. Morin (2001) views learning outcomes to be that which we should know or display in ability. Another approach focuses on institutional power, responsibility, and accountability to uphold standards (Hubball & Gold, 2007). According to this view, curriculum alignment, curriculum assessment, and evaluation are at the core of a shifting definition from what is taught to what is learned (Hubball & Gold, 2007; Hill, 2007; Aviles, 2001a, 2001b). Learning outcomes, which describe

knowledge and ability of students following completion of a course, replace learning objectives, which identify knowledge and skill-building that are taught in the course. In this essay, learning outcomes define new behaviours after a learning experience. They describe the knowledge, skill, and attitudes gained, and make up the overall integrated learning of a course or program (Daniel & McInnes, 2007; Kameoka & Lister, 1991). In a sense, learning outcomes constitute multiple levels of meaning related to accreditation, programming, and course design (Hubball & Gold, 2007).

Pragmatically, learning outcomes for courses or programs are characterized by an action verb, which is observable or measurable. Bloom’s Taxonomy of Education in Undergraduate Teaching includes six levels of learning: knowledge, comprehension, application, analysis, synthesis, and evaluation (Aviles, 2000; 2001a; 2001b). Bloom assigned several verbs corresponding to each knowledge level, rendering them useful for developing learning outcomes, as outlined in Table 1. In Bloom’s Taxonomy used by Aviles (2001b), learning outcomes focus on the quality of undergraduate learning and become progressively more difficult.

Instructors create student learning outcomes and assign grades to student productivity in order to assess learning. Successful completion of courses would indicate attainment of learning outcomes. An outcome-focused course challenges instructors to identify a measurable link between course content and student knowledge or skills following the course. It may also require the development of better tools or assignments for evaluation. Yet, educational governing bodies have started to ask institutions of higher learning to demonstrate this type of learning (Ontario Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities, 2008).

Hubball and Gold (2007) describe learning outcomes as learning-centredness, referring to a curriculum that is responsive to the needs and circumstances of students and to learning experiences designed with progressively more challenging courses. They offer an interconnected model of learning outcomes, explaining their various uses. These include teaching and learning, course design, faculty and cur-

TABLE 1
Bloom's Taxonomy: Knowledge Levels and Corresponding Action Verbs

Knowledge Level	Action Verb
Knowledge	Define, identify, state, list, differentiate, discriminate
Comprehension	Explain, translate, interpret, match, extrapolate
Application	Construct, choose, predict, demonstrate
Analysis	Distinguish, separate, organize, infer, classify
Synthesis	Compose, formulate, create, produce
Evaluation	Debate, judge, critique, assess, compare

(Adapted from Bloom as cited in Aviles, 2001b)

ricular, institutional, and broader contexts. This supports the role of learning outcomes as defining, delivering, assessing, and documenting student learning (Miles & Wilson, 2004). Thus, learning outcomes aid institutions to carry out their programs, assess students and curriculums, and compare themselves as institutions to other institutions.

In transferring from college to university programs, the functions initiated by learning outcomes are paramount in the planning, integration, and success of students. Implementing learning outcomes allows for the communication of clear expectations to learners, instructors, and prospective employers. This is critical for student expectations with regard to making transfers: the instructors' understanding of their students' learning needs and employers' confidence with regard to hiring qualified and experienced professionals.

The use of learning outcomes fosters opportunities for a smoother transition from college to university programs, benefiting both students and institutions. Although using learning outcomes in individual courses allows institutions to assess specific student learning, comparing outcomes for programs addresses all learning outcomes related to a program (Aviles, 2001b). For university program stakeholders, the use of learning outcomes promotes an objective benchmark for formative and summative assessment, as well as a prior learning assessment of students transferring to a university program (Hubball, Gold, Mighty, & Britnell, 2007; Miles & Wilson, 2004).

Suitable institutional practices promoting these opportunities are crucial for student planning, integration, and success.

Benefits in Using Learning Outcomes

Through the use of a systematic method for identifying the specific needs of certain groups of students, employing learning outcomes allows for comparison and promotes accountability. It meets transfer students' learning needs, especially in disciplines where learning outcome data is scarce. For example, a review of U.S. MSW programs suggested that two-thirds of programs only use course grades to assess student learning outcomes (Kameoka & Lister, 1991). Learning outcomes provide a clearer communication of expectations to learners, instructors, and prospective employers and they better measure student success. Coordination and collaboration between programs of study in multiple institutions is one way to use learning outcomes. They are able to remove barriers and promote equity between the educational experiences of various and diverse students.

The use of learning outcomes further provides the opportunity to acknowledge varying student diversity in education backgrounds by promoting a smooth transition to university programs. For example, the primary feature of human service programs in

both colleges and universities involves a professionally designed mix of theory coupled with field practice. While the relative degree of this balance varies from program to program, an underlying focus on service provision is shared by all. Clearly defining learning outcomes, related to both theory and practice in human service programs, at both the college and university level, would serve to benefit the population of students transferring to gain university credits. This approach allows consideration for both the students' needs and circumstances by allowing recognition for previous course work and practical experience.

Using learning outcomes in progressively more challenging courses also contributes to improving student transfer outcomes. They may more clearly demonstrate a student's progress in academic and practical knowledge and skills. It is also possible to use teaching tools to bridge gaps in previous learning experiences, for example, using group work, self-reflection, and presentation to expand learning outcomes. Coordinating distinct and cohesive outcomes at the administrative level can improve guidelines for the transfer process.

Challenges in Using Learning Outcomes

Initiating a learning outcome approach requires overcoming a number of challenges. Miles and Wilson (2004) found that assessing learning outcomes is difficult, often relying on rubrics and matrices (Daz-Lefebvre as cited in Carducci, 2006). These rubrics attempt to define learning that occurs from a variety of methods. For example, learning outcomes may be accomplished in college human service programs that provide excellent experiential learning opportunities but lack extensive theoretical knowledge. Universities more often present theory and research and use multiple and various teaching and testing methods. These differences not only challenge transfer students' learning skills, but they depict the complexity and uncertainty of attempting to measure all types of learning in a learning outcome format. For this reason, learning outcomes are best used as a guide that describes learning rather than a method for standard-

ized testing of learning.

In addition, faculty may need more time to prepare courses that use a learning outcomes approach since this demands a closer agreement between course content, assignments, and outcomes (Aviles, 2001a). These obstacles often make faculty and institutions resistant to using a learning outcomes model. Therefore, developing learning outcomes for courses and programs requires a collaborative effort between faculty and university administrators with a respect for academic freedom.

When college students transfer to university, they may be asked to make up absent theory and research courses. Methods for accomplishing this include offering a one-semester bridging program or a two-course for one direct entry program for college students. These transfer procedures attempt to ensure that students are prepared for the theory and research demands of university education. For students to be successful, colleges and universities must be proactive in bridging the identified gaps between their educational expectations (Miles & Wilson, 2004). Institutional collaboration requires using effective assessment tools, conducting self assessments, and resolving differences about how to measure learning outcomes. Additional resources required to accomplish this provide another challenge for ameliorating transfer credit frustrations (Miles & Wilson, 2004).

Moving Forward Collaboratively

Despite the obstacles, the appropriate use of learning outcomes can assist the process of credit transfers from colleges to universities. Collaborations between institutions of higher learning, deans, and faculty can help identify, develop, and evaluate common understandings of learning outcomes (Miles & Wilson, 2004; Hendriksen, Yang, Love, & Hall, 2005). This may lead to what Hubball and Gold (2007) call the transferability of learning, which encompasses progressive curriculum, alignment of educational programs, and research and training about learning outcomes in programs and courses. Collaboration between colleges and universities can potentially better meet transfer students' needs and improve higher

education options for all students.

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