Create program outcomes

# Introduction

Program outcomes are clear statements of the knowledge, skills, and values (or attitudes) that students can develop by participating in a given program. Much as [learning outcomes](https://uwaterloo.ca/centre-for-teaching-excellence/catalogs/tip-sheets/writing-intended-learning-outcomes) help to guide instructional decisions at the course level, program outcomes help to guide curricular decisions at the unit level.

The [Regulation on Academic Reviews](https://www.mcgill.ca/secretariat/files/secretariat/regulations_on_academic_reviews.pdf) notes that the “learning objectives of the unit or program” should be addressed in the unit or program self-study document as applicable (See section 3: Academic Programs, Teaching and Learning). Academic program review can thus be an opportunity for developing program outcomes.

Program outcomes are being developed in multiple academic units at McGill. Data gathered offers a point of reference for discussions among instructors about what we want the program to look like, and what we want our students to be capable of. The process becomes data informed and faculty driven. These outcomes can be a powerful tool for communicating what content, habits of mind and skills (e.g. communication, research, teamwork) students should have, know, do, or value by the time they graduate.

# Why do program outcomes matter?

Program outcomes express the unit’s priorities using shared language. They can be a touchstone to guide future curricular decisions, to help students progress, and to communicate about the program’s purpose with different audiences in and beyond the university. Specifically:

Program outcomes allow instructors and administrators to:

* identify common expectations for all students in the program
* make learning expectations explicit to students
* for all courses: guide decisions about course development
* within a given course: guide decisions about course content, strategies, and assessment
* communicate with colleagues about courses using common language

Program outcomes allow students to:

* learn about program opportunities and expectations
* guide learning (focus, self-assessment)
* communicate with prospective employers

# How do you create program outcomes?

A guiding question to inform program outcomes is: What knowledge, skills, and values do we want to foster in our students?

The exact process by which your unit determines the answer to that guiding question will vary, depending on your unit’s context (e.g., instructor buy-in, unit size, time available). Drafting program outcomes is a chance to come to a consensus understanding of what matters in your program, so that students can take away these important aspects from their time in the required courses. Program outcomes can be data-informed, developed in consultation, build on past efforts and current strategic priorities, and consider relevant university and external documents.

Draw from the following suggestions as appropriate.

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Suggestion | Rationale |
| Describe why you wish to create program outcomes. See “Why do program outcomes matter,” and identify any additional reasons you plan to develop program outcomes. Have you been asked to do so? Is it an accreditation requirement? Did you hear about program outcomes at a conference? Do colleagues’ views about the purpose of the program differ? | Time is a finite resource, and creating program outcomes takes time. Clearly communicating why you will be creating program outcomes can help foster buy in from colleagues. |
| Develop program outcomes in consultation with instructors, students, and other stakeholders (e.g., unit staff, prospective employers, alumni). | Get people on board from the beginning. |
| Identify data sources that may inform such discussions. For instance, these may include data requests (from Student Information Systems, etc.), surveys and/or focus groups (with instructors, students, alumni, or prospective employers), interviews, benchmarking of peer institution websites, and past department/program reviews and curriculum reports. | This helps to ground discussions in local data reflecting current perspectives and experiences. |
| Identify other relevant information within or beyond the program that you wish to consider when creating program outcomes.  For instance, consider the extent to which university or local strategic documents may come into play, possibly highlighting departmental, institutional or disciplinary commitments that may inform program outcomes.   * University documents: [Equity, Diversity & Inclusion (EDI) Strategic Plan 2020-2025](https://www.mcgill.ca/equity/files/equity/mcgill_strategic_edi_plan_2020-20251.pdf), [Action Plan to Address Anti-Black Racism 2020-2025](https://www.mcgill.ca/provost/files/provost/action_plan_to_address_anti-black_racism.pdf), [Truth & Reconciliation at McGill](https://www.mcgill.ca/indigenous/calls-action), [Sustainability Education Resources](https://teachingkb.mcgill.ca/tlk/sustainability-education-resources) * External documents and relevant literature (e.g., the United Nations’ [Sustainable Development Goals](https://sdgs.un.org/goals), the [Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada’s Reports](https://nctr.ca/records/reports/), relevant requirements/recommendations from accrediting and professional bodies) | This is an opportunity to consider how the eventual program outcomes can reflect the programmatic, institutional, and societal context within which the program takes place. |

## Self-serve materials for developing program outcomes

The following Survey and Agenda templates are offered for units (e.g., programs, departments, faculties) who wish to develop program outcomes. These are complemented by the Program outcomes retreat template, available in the TLS KB article: Develop the curriculum (unit-level). They aim to support units in meeting the following goals during a .5-day retreat:

1. Establish a shared understanding of the concept of program outcomes.
2. Develop draft program outcomes to reflect what students would be able to know, do, and value after completing the program in question. These may be aspirational and can serve as touchstones for making curricular decisions going forward.

Units are welcome to adapt these materials as appropriate to their local contexts. Request a [consultation](https://www.mcgill.ca/tls/contact-us/consultations) if you would like to discuss this process with a TLS colleague.

### Survey

Surveying instructors and students prior to developing program outcomes can help ground the discussion in local stakeholders’ perspectives and priorities. You may wish to consider posing questions such as:

Instructors:

* What makes [unit]’s required courses unique? (point form is fine)
* What are 2-3 of the most important things that students should learn in [program name]? These could be knowledge areas, skills, or values.
* What is a particular strength of the program?
* What is an area of the program where you would like to see more growth or focus?

Students:

* Year in program [multiple choice]
* What, skills, values, or key ideas are you developing in the required courses you have taken so far? (Please share up to five favourites; point form is fine)
* What additional (a) knowledge, (b) skills, and (c) values would you like to develop (or would you have liked to develop) in the required courses?

### Agenda (3.5-hour retreat)

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Time** (min) | **Topic** | **Details** |
| 15 | Welcome | Include retreat goals, agenda, and parking lot.\* |
| 25 | Sharing pre-retreat survey/focus group results [as relevant] | Invite discussion of colleagues’ observations (e.g., “What strikes you?”) |
| 25 | Program outcomes | Definition, purpose, characteristics of program outcomes |
| 40 | Program outcome drafting | * Information gathered prior to the retreat is grouped into 6-10 themes. Participants work in small groups of 2-4 to develop a program outcome from a given theme based on data collected via pre-retreat surveys/focus groups and sample outcomes from other institutions. * Participants write the draft program outcome on flip chart paper. * When they finish drafting a program outcome at one station, the small group moves together to an empty station and begins drafting the next program outcome.   *Materials*: scrap paper, flip chart paper, markers, pens |
| 15 | Break | Provide drinks/snacks if budget allows. |
| 30 | Poster session | Attendees circulate around the room, read the draft program outcomes, and pose questions/provide feedback on them using sticky notes. Questions and feedback can be varied (e.g., indicate if agree/disagree with a part of an outcome; suggest revisions to an outcome; pose questions if something seems unclear).  *Materials*: sticky notes, markers, pens |
| 45 | Discussion | Share the draft program outcomes so all can see; discuss each in turn as a group.   * What’s missing? [Is there something that should be reflected among these draft program outcomes that you don’t see here?] * What’s redundant? [Are there some program outcomes that you think can be combined?] * What’s not necessary? [Are there some program outcomes that would not reflect the whole program, which can be removed?] |
| 15 | Wrap-up | Thank attendees and describe possible next steps, such as refining program outcome language; inviting feedback from instructors/students; finalizing program outcomes; or curriculum mapping. |

\* The parking lot is a visible place for ideas and questions arising that are outside of the retreat’s scope, to ensure that they are not lost. It can help to keep the discussion focused on the day’s goals.

# What are characteristics of useful program outcomes?

Useful program outcomes…

* Focus on student learning
* Are clear and concise
* Are potentially measurable
* Are achievable

Evolution of a program outcome (adapted from [Thomson Rivers University](https://www.tru.ca/__shared/assets/examples_of_learning_outcomes_good_and_bad32629.pdf))

By the end of this program, students will:

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Draft # | Phrasing | Comments |
| 1 | be given opportunities to learn effective communication skills. | This describes the program content but not what the students will be able to know, do, or value. |
| 2 | have a deeper appreciation for good  communication practices. | There is no action verb, so it is not clear what the student will be able to do, or how it could be measured. |
| 3 | understand principles of effective communication. | It is unclear how “understand” could be measured (read more about the “[sinister 16](https://www.uwindsor.ca/ctl/sites/uwindsor.ca.ctl/files/primer-on-learning-outcomes.pdf)” verbs to avoid when drafting outcomes, p. 4). |
| 4 | communicate effectively in a professional environment through technical reports and presentations. | In this final version, there is an action verb, the phrasing focuses on what the student will learn, it is concise, and the student’s achievement of the program outcome can be measured through assessment of the technical reports and presentations mentioned. |

# What comes afterwards?

* Following the development of program outcomes, units can embark on a curriculum mapping process. This is a process of reviewing existing courses to ensure that outcomes are represented and supported in the curricula. It is not expected that every program outcome is addressed in every course.
* Units can share the program outcomes with incoming instructors, staff, and students. It is important for students to be informed about the program outcomes from their very first year in the program, including the purpose of the outcomes, and where and how students can achieve them during their time at University.[[1]](#footnote-1)
* Students’ attention can be drawn to how program outcomes are addressed in different courses. Consider how else you can ensure that instructors, students, prospective employers, and other audiences can be made aware of the program outcomes.
* The program outcomes can be used as a touchstone when making future decisions about curriculum change.

1. Sanson, M. (June 29, 2009). “[Preparing tomorrow’s lawyers today: graduate attributes in first year law](http://www.fyhe.com.au/past_papers/papers09/content/pdf/7E.pdf).” Presented at the 12th Pacific Rim First Year in Higher Education (FYHE) Conference. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)