



The Conference Board
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CASE STUDY 29

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Program
College

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Name of Program
*Mount Royal College's
College-Wide
Learning Outcomes
Initiative*

Skills Developed
*Fundamental
Personal Management
Teamwork*

Developing and supporting methods used by instructors to build and develop their students' knowledge and skills

MOUNT ROYAL COLLEGE'S COLLEGE-WIDE LEARNING OUTCOMES INITIATIVE PHASE 3 *Integrating, Teaching to and Assessing Skills-based Learning Outcomes*

BY KURTIS KITAGAWA

October 2000

Mount Royal College has reached the halfway mark in its eight-year plan to integrate, teach to and assess skills-based learning outcomes across the College by 2005. Case studies 9 and 27 reported on earlier stages of Mount Royal's ongoing commitment to its students to systematically develop their transferable skills and equip them with the knowledge they need to make successful transitions to university programs or the world of work.

Overview

A previous study in this series (Case Study 9) profiled Phase 1 of Mount Royal College's College-Wide Learning Outcomes Initiative, a systematic strategy to prepare Mount Royal's graduates for lifelong learning and equip them with the employability skills they need to succeed in the 21st century workplace.

That study focused on how and why in 1997–98 the College went about identifying institution-wide learning outcomes to better position itself to serve its community of learners, many of whom are university transfer students. The outcomes are:

- ✓ Thinking skills
- ✓ Communication

- ✓ Information retrieval and evaluation
- ✓ Ethical reasoning
- ✓ Computer literacy
- ✓ Group effectiveness

These College-wide learning outcomes provide:

- ✓ A structure or framework on which to hang the content of disciplines
 - ✓ A common link across all disciplines with potential for connecting the different disciplines
 - ✓ Direction and a roadmap for skills development
 - ✓ A template for the College to assess how well students are learning at the course, program and institutional levels
 - ✓ A framework for creating outcome-assessment feedback loops, which have the potential to strengthen teaching and learning at the College
- Phase 2 of Mount Royal College's College-Wide Learning Outcomes Initiative, featured in Case Study 27, focused on providing support to faculty as they help students to acquire—systematically, progressively and successively—the skills they need for continuous learning and workplace success. This support involved:
1. Further clarifying what the six learning outcomes identified by the College look like in practice

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2. Drafting a strategic plan to promote awareness and knowledge of identified learning outcomes among students and full-time and part-time faculty
3. Producing a Faculty Information Package, which includes a literature-based review of the common rationales for adopting outcome-based teaching and learning models at post-secondary institutions, including arguments about how employing these models may improve student learning—this speaks to academics in their own terms
4. Producing a workbook, *The Bridge to College Wide Learning Outcomes—How to Create a Course Outline with Learning Outcomes*

Phase 3, the subject of the present case study, is concerned with profiling additional ways in which Mount Royal College is supporting its instructors in integrating, teaching to and assessing skills-based learning outcomes.

Groups Served

- All students
- All faculty

Objectives

- ✓ Help College instructors be more explicit about the knowledge and skill outcomes of their courses
- ✓ Help instructors develop strategies that will work for them as they teach to knowledge and skill outcomes
- ✓ Help instructors develop continuous improvement practices to enhance their teaching and encourage students' development of knowledge and skills
- ✓ Make three-way assessment involving students, their instructors and advisory committee members for their programs more deliberate, widespread and systematic across the College—assessment needs to promote students' learning, evaluate their progress and enhance teaching

Context

Typically, customary practices or cultures are only questioned in times of change.

Mount Royal College's move toward teaching/learning outcomes has prompted faculty and administration to think about how best to work together to recognize the contributions, and address the concerns, of faculty while moving forward with the outcomes initiative.

It is worth reviewing some of those concerns, since understanding and meeting faculty on their "ground" is crucial for the success of the College's initiative. Among instructors' concerns are:

- ✓ Teaching/learning outcomes are an add-on in terms of their teaching load
- ✓ Imposing a requirement to incorporate outcomes constitutes interference with academic independence
- ✓ Education is different from training—the work of Mount Royal College goes beyond skills-based preparation for the workplace, and a focus on skills-based outcomes is driven by big business
- ✓ Imposing uniform skills-based outcomes across the curricula effectively deprives faculty of their ownership of the curricula
- ✓ Spending time on developing students' transferable skills detracts from the imperative to cover content—this is becoming an issue in science- and technology-intensive areas, which have traditionally focused heavily on the delivery of content; as well, instructors point out that because their students are university transfer students, their curriculum is to a certain extent dictated by the knowledge content expectations of the universities

The College administration have met faculty members' concerns by emphasizing that the outcomes initiative is about preparing students for the workplace, for future academic work and for daily living. Faculty are now beginning to recognize that the College-Wide Learning Outcomes Initiative is not about being told what they should be teaching and assessing, but rather an attempt to make more deliberate and explicit what they are already doing in relation to developing

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students' writing, thinking and teamwork skills to meet the expectations of students themselves.

Moreover, College administrators have been able to point to recent statements from some of the major science associations in Canada and the United States that stress that trying to cover all the content a student will ever need to know is unrealistic—that students might be better served if instructors take a narrow and deep approach rather than a broad and shallow approach. The idea is that it is far more effective to teach students how to find, evaluate and use information than to cram them full of undigested facts. The College recognizes that teaching practices need to be benchmarked against and related back to a vision of what every Mount Royal College graduate should be or have upon graduation, and that instructors need to be supported as they hone their teaching skills.

In other words, the College's skills-based learning plan is fundamentally a pedagogical strategy to help students to build their skills systematically and intentionally—to become responsible not only for their own learning but also for transferring and applying what they learn, whenever and wherever their knowledge and skills are called upon. Mount Royal College's initiative also recognizes the value of collaboration in developing skills and has designed a program of peer learning to prepare the way for instructors, who are normally solitary practitioners of their art, to share effective teaching and assessment strategies for skills development and to use feedback from students to identify teaching and learning challenges and support continuous improvement.

Mount Royal has also opened dialogue on the workloads of faculty members as a result of a variety of changes, including curriculum renewal and the introduction of technology. Embedding assessment in the curriculum is less labour-intensive for faculty than the Alverno College model. In this model, assessment takes place

outside the classroom and involves people from business and industry coming in to assess students' skills while students role-play a real-life situation. However, embedded skills assessment still has workload implications. In addition, Mount Royal College's efforts to identify excellence in teaching and learning, rather than innovation in research, as the core competency of their institution helps to clarify for instructors the College's expectations regarding the need to take the discipline of teaching seriously. This is particularly important since most faculty are hired on the basis of their expertise in a particular area and often have little or no teaching experience.

It is significant that the College's support for instructors is, as much as possible, developed and driven by instructors. This helps to build instructor ownership of skills-based learning outcomes, which in turn prepares the way for instructor ownership of the discipline of teaching. Teachers grow their craft by sharing effective practices with each other and helping other teachers, which has the added benefit of preserving their independence.

Activities

Support for instructors at Mount Royal takes many forms, including:

- ✓ Engaging advisory committees consisting of prospective employers, industry personnel, faculty members and, where appropriate, professional association representatives to help ensure that the curriculum is grounded in the realities of today's workplace—advisory committees do such things as create partnerships, help with fundraising, secure placements for students during their education, link graduates with jobs and provide them with feedback on their performance while they are still students. Advisory committees also review major projects involving oral presentations by students (individually or in groups) that pull together the major theoretical concepts learned and skills developed

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- in their programs. Advisory committee members then reflect on the success of different programs in developing the skill sets graduates will need to be successful in their jobs, identify gaps and work with faculty to make improvements where necessary.
- ✓ Conducting a full-day workshop with faculty from the Centre for Applied Communications to integrate problem-based learning across their four applied baccalaureate degree programs.
 - ✓ Creating a database of teaching and assessment methodologies and processes relating to the six College-wide learning outcomes to recognize successes, disseminate effective practices and spawn innovation at the practitioner level—the database will be searchable by teaching approaches or assessment approaches or both and can be accessed by every faculty member in the College. Piloting the database, using teaching and assessment of thinking skills as a focus, helps build ownership at the practitioner level.
 - ✓ Promoting a Web-based tool (information research module) for students who have writing and research components in their courses to guide them through the process of evaluating information sources on a given topic—this tool, developed by faculty, supplements the practice of bringing librarians into courses or taking students down to library labs.
 - ✓ Producing a video encouraging students to take an active role in developing their skills (e.g., group process or teamwork skills) while they become proficient in different knowledge areas.
 - ✓ Making available through a Web site a series of 35 modules on the fundamentals of English composition—prepared by faculty in the English department, these modules are intended to support faculty from any department who want to introduce more writing or be more thorough in their assessment of writing skills and in the feedback they give their students on their writing.
- ✓ Focusing the work of interdisciplinary College-wide learning outcome teams on developing pedagogy to support the development of the different learning outcomes, including paper-based handouts, and developing a prototype database of effective teaching and assessment strategies relating to student acquisition of thinking skills.
 - ✓ Hosting an annual three-day facilitated Focus on Outcomes Teaching/Learning Institute that brings together faculty from all programs in the College to review materials relating to learning outcomes, assessment techniques, teaching strategies, organizational change related to integrating learning outcomes across the College, and the different means the College has prepared to support instructors as they integrate, teach to and assess learning outcomes.
 - ✓ Finding ways to keep the learning and the connections faculty make with each other alive after the learning institutes end.
 - ✓ Conducting a teaching-with-technology discussion series—a twice-monthly series of presentations given by different faculty members to highlight how they are using technology in innovative ways for teaching, learning and skills development—presentations have focused, for example, on how technology has fostered thinking and writing skills in students, including their ability to evaluate information sources turned up by Internet searches, and facilitated asynchronous group processes among students through course chat rooms, etc.
 - ✓ Operating a post-tenure evaluation process through peer collaboration triads—in late August, faculty form their triads for the coming year; each triad then meets monthly throughout the year to share members' experiences relating to successes and challenges around integrating College-wide outcomes—teachers talking about teaching with other teachers.

Instructors prepare students to be better learners in each other's courses. ►

- ✓ Mandating a three-year instructional support program for new faculty, who must participate as a requirement of their employment—the program helps to develop their teaching and classroom management skills, which tend not to be emphasized in faculty members' academic preparation for teaching. The program, which represents a move toward professionalizing the art of instruction, includes orientation to the outcome/assessment model of the College. Ongoing support for integrating College-wide outcomes is available to new faculty through the curriculum consultants in the Academic Development Centre and also through a variety of print-based curriculum resources.
- ✓ Authoring a series of workbooks intended to assist faculty with teaching to and assessing skills-based outcomes in the context of their courses.
- ✓ Printing the learning outcomes in the College calendar.
- ✓ Presenting a discussion series on the changing role of faculty, staff and students in learning for the future—focusing less on putting knowledge in people's heads and more on teaching students how to develop ways of researching, evaluating and synthesizing information.
- ✓ Making \$0.25 million available to faculty who want to restructure their courses by using technology, for example, by dropping a lecture and replacing it with a Web-delivered component.

Benefits for Instructors

- Learn from their peers across disciplines
- Prepare students to be better learners in each other's courses

Benefits for Students

- Learn skills such as computer literacy in the context of the courses they are taking
- Learn how to research and evaluate Web sources in the context of the courses they are taking

► *Students learn skills such as computer literacy in the context of the courses they are taking.*

- Gain an advantage in the job market and acquire the skills they need to succeed in further education or in their daily lives
- Reflect on using their skills and deliberately hone them throughout their careers
- Follow a more coherent curriculum structured around learning outcomes at the course, program and institutional level

Benefits for the College

- Can position itself in the market as offering skills in addition to knowledge and academic qualifications
- Can better meet students' expectations with regard to skills development for the world of work—students frequently ask “Why should I take this course? I want to know what I can achieve by doing this.”
- Can create outcome-assessment feedback loops that may result in enhanced teaching and learning

Keys to Success for Instructors

- Understanding that by enhancing their teaching and assessment practices with regard to skills, they become better teachers
- Holding students accountable for their learning of skills across the institution to enhance student outcomes in all subjects—effective communication and clear thinking skills learned and applied across the curriculum, and not just in an English composition or political science course, prepare students to be critical thinkers and problem solvers in all that they do

Keys to Success for the College

- Having academic champions at the management, administration and practitioner levels
- Deliberately focusing on developing students' skills, a value added that helps distinguish the College from its competitors

College-wide learning outcomes are not just workplace skills; they are skills applied to daily life and are critical to students' survival as they move into universities.



- Driving and supporting the College-Wide Learning Outcomes Initiative directly from the Vision 2005 statement
- Viewing assessment as a tool to enhance student learning, not as a means to “punish” individual faculty members or groups
- Having a tradition of including workplace or directed field study components in most if not all two-year diplomas and four-year applied baccalaureate degrees
- Operating all programs in close consultation with advisory committees composed of employers and, where appropriate, of professional association representatives (e.g., nurses), who help ensure that College curricula are grounded in the realities of today’s workplace
- Emphasizing to faculty who teach university transfer students that college-wide learning outcomes are not just workplace skills; they are skills applied in daily life and, moreover, are critical to students’ survival as they move into universities
- Being patient and persistent and providing a range of support over an extended period of time—building consensus around the idea of teaching to and assessing skills outcomes takes time, and moving from theory to practice requires a battery of positive supports
- Making linkages between teaching subject-specific content and developing generic skills more transparent
- Encouraging peer learning, which is less threatening to faculty
- Ensuring that individual faculty members have direct connections to interdisciplinary College-wide learning outcome teams, which are composed of 50 to 60 faculty members (9 to 10 faculty dedicated to each of the six learning outcomes)
- Building buy-in among faculty by getting them to work together on a series of programs or courses, decide what the outcomes should be and then collectively determine how students are going to achieve success

Assessing students’ skills helps identify teaching and learning challenges that need to be addressed; it is not a comment on the instructional ability of faculty.



Challenges for Instructors

- Recognizing that assessing, and adjusting teaching practices to improve, students’ skills development may be more or less difficult depending on the subject area
- Understanding that assessing students’ skills helps identify teaching and learning challenges that need to be addressed; it is not a comment on the instructional ability of faculty
- Seeing the value of integrating, teaching to and assessing learning outcomes—understanding that supporting student achievement of learning outcomes is inherent in the concept of education at Mount Royal College
- Gaining awareness of how to build teams and how teams work to deliberately help students acquire skills in their courses

Challenges for Students

- Being active participants in their own learning and skills development—seeing themselves as responsible for their learning
- Making the connection between the courses they are taking and the skills they are developing
- Actively transferring their skills in new home, school, work or community contexts

Challenges for the College

- Where appropriate, encouraging faculty to use problem-based learning modules to connect the theoretical components of the curriculum with practical workplace problems and situations
- Encouraging faculty who teach university transfer students to develop community and workplace links in addition to teaching to college-wide outcomes
- Ensuring that the activities of the college-wide learning outcomes teams are consistent with the overall direction of the College’s outcomes initiative
- Getting instructors to compile a portfolio of their successes in helping students achieve learning

Mount Royal College is helping its instructors to teach deliberately to outcomes and assess students' progress toward them.



- outcomes—just as they track articles they have published or ratings students have given them as evidence of their effectiveness and suitability for tenure
- Examining the changing role of faculty members and the changing role of the College in facilitating learning (who and what is being taught and who is responsible)—looking to see whether the College needs to make adjustments in how it assigns or assesses workload; in view of the need to develop students' skills as a graduation requirement, perhaps the College could count the hours instructors spend outside class mentoring students, not just the hours spent at the front of their classrooms
 - Keeping the outcomes initiative alive in discipline departments as well as in outcome teams
 - Supporting faculty in facilitating student skills development and the development of active, independent learners
 - Encouraging students to be forthcoming with their ideas about integrating skills-based outcomes into their courses
 - Providing funding and resources for departmental retreats to encourage integration of outcomes and assessments, and to explore alternative approaches to teaching and learning
 - Making College-wide learning outcomes core competencies for all employees at Mount Royal College, including support staff, administrators, faculty and management

Resources

- ✓ \$250K for course adaptations involving Web-based delivery of content
- ✓ \$125K/year for curriculum renewal
- ✓ 20 person-years, including 2 person-years for curriculum developers

Innovation

Mount Royal College's innovation lies not so much in identifying or making explicit skills-based learning outcomes and integrating them into course, program and graduation requirements as in helping its instructors to teach deliberately to those outcomes and to assess students' progress toward them with a view to enhancing teaching and learning. The College's innovation is also evident in the way it downplays the traditional academic tendency to deliver knowledge and at the same time encourages and empowers its students to become active participants in their own learning and development. When faculty are explicitly helping students make the connection between knowledge and skills, when they are helping students acquire the knowledge and skills they need in the world of work, and when students are actively transferring their new-found insights and abilities, learning and skills development may truly be said to have taken place.

Achievement

- Seeing the operation perform like an orchestra—everybody knows what they are doing and why they are doing it

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