Tools for Building an Outcomes-Based College Curriculum

Ruth Stiehl and Les Lewchuk

We fill our college catalogs with a litany of courses – often disconnected, modularized units of learning – taught by faculty who rarely talk to each other. The student's experience has often been one of registering for the required courses, passing each course separately, and ending with a transcript that shows each individual part has been completed successfully.…What's wrong with this picture?

From *The MAPPING Primer*
Stiehl and Lewchuk, 2005

In a little blue book called *The OUTCOMES Primer* (2002), we sought to reduce the confusion that surrounds the idea of student learning outcomes (SLOs) and assessment within the concept of a learning college. Already in its seventh printing, this first primer continues to provide a framework for post-20th century curriculum design. It continues to inform the work we do with colleges across the country around student learning outcomes.

But once faculty are clear about how today's student learning outcomes differ from learning *objectives* of the 20th century, the real and continuing challenge is to find ways to get faculty engaged in aligning courses with the intended SLOs. *The MAPPING Primer* (2005) is designed to do just that.

The curriculum planning tools in this new book have been designed to help faculty see the connections between classroom learning and life roles, between course outcomes and program outcomes, between course assessment and capstone assessment, among basic skills, general education and program learning outcomes. In essence, these three tools have the power to help us integrate learning experiences in ways we have rarely seen.
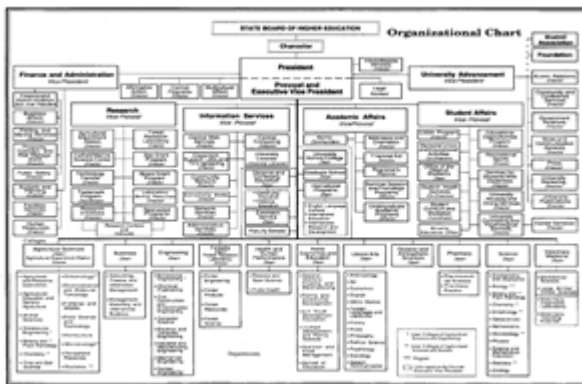
Drawing Connections

Pick up any college catalog and you will see a litany of courses: modularized units of learning, taught by faculty who rarely talk to each other. Students register for what is

required, choosing seemingly disconnected electives, completing the individual requirements for each course, passing each separately, and accumulating sufficient credits to merit a certificate or degree.

Teaching toward significant learning outcomes requires something quite different. It requires that we build a sense of connection between courses (learning experiences) and take on a sense of collective responsibility for assessment (standards) and student success. This is what we often describe as thinking systemically about learning.

Through more than 10 years' experience working with community colleges on student learning outcomes and assessment, we have discovered unique ways to help faculty think systemically. One of our tools requires that faculty draw a map of their program, visually depicting how learning progresses. Using a set of visual conventions from *The MAPPING Primer,* they construct the student's whole experience, entry to outcome.

This kind of program mapping is quite a departure from the hierarchical flowcharts we are more accustomed to seeing. Take, for example, the way we traditionally draw pictures of our organizations: a series of hierarchical boxes establishing solid boundaries and separation of duties. Here is a recent organization chart for the university where I spent most of my career. It doesn't look much like a dynamic learning organization, does it? In fact, if you look closely enough, you will find that faculty and students don't even exist.


(Organization Chart, p. 97 in *The Mapping Primer*)

We need not lock ourselves into this kind of old thinking. We can draw pictures that better depict the organic nature of things: the flow of energy and resources, the dynamic connections that are inherent in a true learning community. Creating a new dynamic image can give us new insights and change our perception of how things really work. Sometimes it is as simple as drawing circles instead of squares, permeable lines instead of solid lines, and embedded layers rather than isolated parts. See the results for yourself.

Faculty teams created the following three program maps around a sheet of butcher paper, using round sticky notes. Each map uses the basic conventions for mapping

programs illustrated in *The MAPPING Primer.* In each case, you are looking at their first attempt. Since then, they have made many changes based upon what they learned in the mapping process.
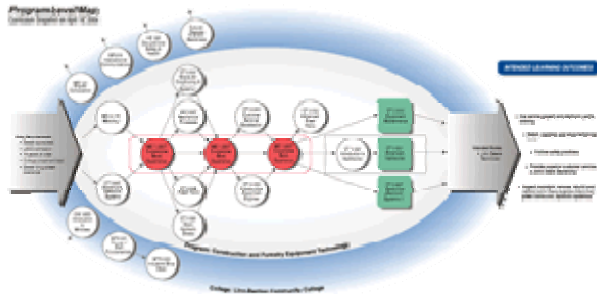
(Construction and Forestry Map, p. 111 in *The Mapping Primer*)

(Mathematics Map, p. 119 in *The Mapping Primer*)

(Administrative Assistant Map, p. 129 in *The Mapping Primer*)

In addition to these sample maps, *The MAPPING Primer* contains 12 more examples in many different program areas.

Talking With Each Other: A Collective Responsibility

Margaret Wheatley said it best in her book, *Turning to One Another* (2002) when she wrote "all change, even very large and powerful change, begins when a few people start talking with one another about something they care about…we rediscover a sense of unity. We remember we are part of a greater whole. And as an added joy, we also discover our collective wisdom. We suddenly see how wise we can be together."

This thought explains the surprise we feel each time we watch faculty use these tools. Faculties become acutely aware of the collective nature of their responsibility for student learning outcomes and standards. And once the conversation begins, it is almost impossible to stop. Shared insights generate a multitude of questions around entry requirements, course sequencing, course alignment with intended learning outcomes, assessment strategies, basic skill needs, themes, capstone experiences, and capstone assessment. It's enough to fill the faculty meeting agenda for months to come.

Curriculum Development is a Conversation, Not a Technology

Writing *The MAPPING Primer* has reminded us once again that the development of student learning outcomes and the alignment of courses with those outcomes is essentially an interactive process in which all members of a learning community participate. Conversational tools such as those described in *The MAPPING Primer* are only means of generating a sense of collective responsibility for learning outcomes. When a college purchases a technological system for the purpose of curriculum development, it should be used to document the conversation, never to replace it.

References

Stiehl, R., & Lewchuk, L. (2005). *The MAPPING Primer: Tools for Reconstructing the College Curriculum.* Corvallis, OR: The Learning Organization.

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Wheatley, M. J. (2002). *Turning to One Another: Simple Conversations to Restore Hope to the Future.* New York: Simon and Schuster.

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