

# Program Standards in the College System



**ALGONQUIN**  
COLLEGE

Lifesaver # 1

## **Still Surfing the Wave of Educational Reform**

The idea for program standards in the college system was introduced in a 1990 Ontario Government document entitled *Vision 2000: Quality and Opportunity*. In an era of rapid change in society, the development of standards was seen as a way of preparing the college system to train the workforce for the emerging global economy of the 1990's and beyond. Standards for college programs were part of the trend towards Outcome-Based Education that became the goal of many educational institutions in the 1990's. Standards remain the basis for curriculum development in the college system.

As a result of the *Vision 2000* document, The College Standards and Accreditation Council (CSAC) was established in 1993 to oversee the development of standards. Standards for Generic Skills and General Education were developed and Vocational Outcomes were established for more than 200 college programs.

CSAC was closed down in 1996 and Program Standards became the responsibility of the ministry responsible for colleges, now called the Ministry of Training, Colleges, and Universities (MTCU). In 1999, the MTCU began a review of the Vocational Outcomes for 20 approved programs. A number of program vocational outcomes have been revised and developed annually since. In 2005, a review revised the Generic Skills Standards. They became Essential Employability Skills (EES). The General Education Standard was also revised and became the General Education Requirement.<sup>1</sup>

Another initiative that emerged from the *Vision 2000* document and accompanied the development of the Vocational, General Education, and Generic Skills standards was prior learning assessment and recognition (PLAR). While learning outcomes for programs addressed the issues of quality and accountability in college programs, PLAR made college credentials more accessible to the general population.

## **The Credentials Framework**

The *Ontario Colleges of Applied Arts and Technology Act, 2002*, affirmed the role of Program Standards in the college system. As part of the *Policy Framework* that accompanies the *Act*, a variety of directives and their related

responsibilities are laid out. Of primary importance in describing the role of program standards is the Credentials Framework. Throughout the *Binding Policy Directive*, the Credentials Framework emerges as an important foundation for programs of instruction. Whether developing, offering, or reviewing a program, it is clear that colleges are responsible for ensuring that "programs of instruction are consistent with the Credentials Framework."<sup>2</sup>

The Credentials Framework not only embraces the program standards, but it also provides guidelines for ensuring the integrity of credentials being granted. These guidelines require all programs of instruction leading to an Ontario College Credential, whether there is a provincial program standard or not, to include the same three components: the Vocational Learning Outcomes, the Essential Employability Skills Outcomes, and the General Education Requirement. (See the back page for a detailed description of each of these components.)

## **Purpose of this Lifesaver**

The purpose of this Lifesaver is to

- explain the content of program standards, and
- outline the role of Program Standards in Outcome-Based education.

### **INSIDE**

- Standards.
- Learning Outcomes.
- Answers to Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs).
- The Program Standards Document.

## **Principles**

Standards apply to specific programs or program areas. In a particular program, standards imply that all learners demonstrate achievement of the same learning outcome to receive credit or a specific credential. The credit is the same for everyone. At the same time, standards-based education recognizes that there are many different routes to the achievement of the standard. Learning takes place in many environments and students learn in many different ways and at different rates. What matters is not

<sup>1</sup> Ministry of Training, Colleges, and Universities, "A History of the Program Standards." (updated February 22, 2006) <http://www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/general/college/progstan/history.html>.

<sup>2</sup> Ministry of Training, Colleges, and Universities, "Framework for Programs of Instruction," *Minister's Binding Policy Directive*, Issued: April, 2003. Revised: April 2005. p. 3.

## ***Professor Of The 21st Century***

The content of this Lifesaver is related to the following Professor of the 21st Century Teaching Competency:

### 7. Designing Courses and Programs.

how the learning occurred or how long it took to reach the outcome, but rather that the learning outcome was achieved.

Standards do not imply standardization. The learning outcomes describe the performance that needs to be demonstrated by all learners. They do not, however, prescribe specific content or a set curriculum. The same learning outcome may be achieved through study of a wide variety of content and participation in different learning experiences.

Helping all learners to achieve the performances described in the Vocational Learning Outcomes implies that faculty will need to design a range of learning activities that facilitate practice and achievement of learning outcomes. Students must have an opportunity to move beyond the accumulation of information and discrete skills to engage in learning experiences that allow them to construct their own understanding actively.

To that end, standards are expressed as learning outcomes that represent the integrated learning of skills, knowledge, and attitudes. They reflect all the characteristics of learning outcomes. They are significant, meaningful, essential, transferable, and verifiable role performances.

With a working definition of standards in hand, here are some principles that support the movement towards outcomes-based education over the next several years:

- Learners will demonstrate the achievement of all standards attached to a program of study before they receive a credential.
- Each learning outcome will clearly describe the role performance to be demonstrated by all learners. Programs indicate how learners will be evaluated to ensure that they have achieved each learning outcome and clearly describe the essential performance criteria that will be used to verify or validate that the outcome has been achieved.
- Performance criteria for learning outcomes for college programs/courses will reflect college-level learning.
- The learning outcomes that are essential for receiving credit or a credential will be made explicit

at the beginning of the course/program.

- Learners will reliably demonstrate the achievement of learning outcomes. This means that the performance expressed by the learning outcome will be demonstrated in its entirety more than once and in more than one context.
- Acknowledging that learners will achieve learning outcomes at different rates and in different ways, credit will be awarded when learners can demonstrate the achievement of an outcome irrespective of the learning process or the time taken to learn.
- Learning experiences, assessment, and evaluation practices will be directly related to learning outcomes.

### ***Standards***

The Canadian Oxford Dictionary (1998) defines a "standard" as:

- "an object or quality or measure serving as a basis or example or principle to which others conform or should conform or by which the accuracy or quality of others is judged.
- the degree of excellence etc. required for a particular purpose."

Used within an educational context, standards also imply a reference point against which performance is judged. They clearly identify the performances that must be demonstrated by learners in order to receive credit to earn a college credential. Standards will also be used to assess the performance of college programs. A quality assurance process ensures that college programs are accountable for the achievement of Program Standards. Standards for college programs are expressed as learning outcomes.

### ***Learning Outcomes***

"Learning outcomes represent culminating demonstrations of learning and achievement. In addition, learning outcomes are interrelated and cannot be viewed in isolation of one another. As such, they should be viewed as a comprehensive whole. They describe performances that demonstrate that significant integrated learning by graduates of the program has been achieved and verified."<sup>3</sup>

### **Essential characteristics of Vocational Learning Outcomes**

In addition to describing the results achieved at the end of the learning process, Vocational Learning Outcomes

1. describe performances that integrate knowledge, skills, and attitudes that are necessary and significant for college graduates to be effective in their vocational and personal pursuits.
2. represent the level of performance that is required for graduation.

<sup>3</sup> Ministry of Training, Colleges, and Universities, "Published College Program Standards." (updated June 22, 2007) <http://www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/general/college/progstan/index.html> .

3. fix that level at a point that is appropriate for the credential being sought and that is realistic and achievable by students at the post-secondary level.
4. reflect the present and, most significantly, the anticipated future requirements for the workplace and society as understood and reflected by employers, professional associations and educators.
5. ensure that the performance of learners in meeting the outcome is measurable.
6. do not dictate specific curriculum.
7. are transferable in the sense that the learning should assist the learner, to the greatest extent possible, in adapting to change, by being applicable to a variety of work and life contexts.
8. are sufficiently clear to be understandable to learners, educators, employers and the public.
9. reflect, consistently, the over-riding principle of equity and fairness and accommodate the needs of diverse learners.

### RESOURCES

Individuals looking for more information may find the following resources useful:

- The Ontario Ministry of Training, Colleges, and Universities College Diploma and Certificate Program Standards Site:  
<http://www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/general/college/progstan/intro.html>
- The Professor's Resource Site:  
<http://elearning.algonquincollege.com/profres/>

### Answers to Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs)

#### **Will Program Standards really make a difference to what I do in the classroom?**

Yes! You will need to work with your colleagues to ensure that students are able to achieve and demonstrate the Vocational Learning Outcomes before they graduate. It will have implications for the kinds of learning activities that you design for students. It will also have an important influence on how you evaluate students. You will need to ensure that evaluation tools actually require learners to demonstrate the role performances described by the learning outcomes.

#### **What are the benefits of Program Standards for students?**

Four of the direct benefits for students are the following:

- Students will have a clear indication of what they are expected to learn and demonstrate.
- Standards will promote access for learners. They can be used by learners who already have relevant learning in place as a basis for advanced standing and prior learning assessment and recognition.
- Graduates can use standards as a marketing tool when seeking employment.
- Standards are a tool for maintaining a program's quality assurance and credibility.

#### **What are the benefits of Program Standards for programs?**

Program Standards provide the following benefits for programs:

- improve transferability,
- make explicit essential learning,
- promote accountability for quality by providing guidance in the quality assurance process, and
- provide recognition for programs that are accredited.

#### **What if a program of instruction is not listed on the Ministry of Training, Colleges, and Universities Program Standards site?**

Colleges develop and offer programs of instruction that extend well beyond the programs covered by provincial program standards. When these programs are developed, offered, and reviewed, colleges are responsible for ensuring that the programs are consistent with the Credentials Framework.

As a result, if an Ontario College Credential is being granted, upon successful completion of the program students will have reliably demonstrated the Essential Employability Skills Learning Outcomes, met the General Education Requirement, and reliably demonstrated the Vocational Learning Outcomes for the program. In this case, the Vocational Learning Outcomes will have been developed locally, and will form an integral component of annual curriculum reviews as well as cyclical Program Quality Reviews.

### QUESTIONS??

For more information, contact Learning & Teaching Services.

## ***The Program Standards Document***

System-wide program standards have been created for a variety of programs leading to Ontario College Credentials. Each program standard contains (1) the Vocational Learning Outcomes for the program, (2) the Essential Employability Skills Learning Outcomes, and (3) the General Education Requirement.

### **(1) Vocational Learning Outcomes**

These are the vocationally specific learning outcomes that apply to the programs in question. Employers, industry and professional associations, and program graduates currently working in the field are all involved in the development and review process, as are representatives of the colleges themselves.

#### ***Sample Vocational Learning Outcomes***

The graduate of Interior Design has reliably demonstrated the ability to analyze a client's needs and goals by using research methodology and techniques.

The graduate of Office Administration—General has reliably demonstrated the ability to organize and process electronic and paper communications to assist the flow of information in the workplace.

The graduate of Computer Programmer has reliably demonstrated the ability to use documented solutions to troubleshoot problems associated with software installation and customization.

### **(2) Essential Employability Skills Learning Outcomes**

These are skills that, regardless of a student's program or discipline, are critical for success in the workplace, in day-to-day living and for lifelong learning.

Essential Employability Skills Learning Outcomes cover the broad areas of Communication, Numeracy, Critical Thinking and Problem Solving, Information Management, Interpersonal, and Personal. Within these six broad areas, eleven Essential Employability Skills Learning Outcomes have been identified.

#### ***Sample Essential Employability Skills Learning Outcomes***

The two learning outcomes for the Communication Skill area are

<b>DEFINING SKILLS: Skill areas to be demonstrated by graduates:</b>	<b>LEARNING OUTCOMES: The levels of achievement required by graduates. The graduate has reliably demonstrated the ability to:</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Reading</li> <li>• Writing</li> <li>• Speaking</li> <li>• Listening</li> <li>• Presenting</li> <li>• Visual literacy</li> </ul>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. <i>communicate clearly, concisely and correctly in the written, spoken, and visual form that fulfills the purpose and meets the needs of the audience.</i></li> <li>2. <i>respond to written, spoken, or visual messages in a manner that ensures effective communication.</i></li> </ol>

### **(3) General Education Requirement**

The General Education Requirement is not expressed as learning outcomes. General Education courses contribute to the development of citizens who are conscious of the diversity, complexity, and richness of the human experience, and the society in which they live and work. In order to support this purpose, General Education courses are organized thematically. The specific theme areas to be covered by General Education courses are

1. Arts in Society,
2. Civic Life,
3. Social and Cultural Understanding,
4. Personal Understanding, and
5. Science and Technology.