

Tip Sheet

Writing or Revising Program Learning Outcomes (PLOs)

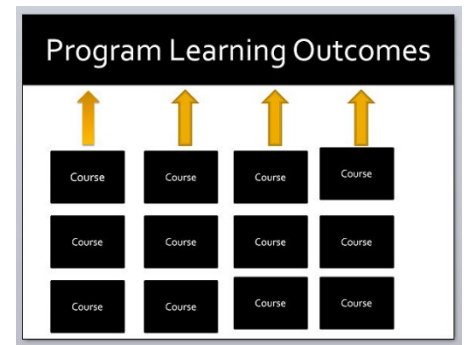
Center for Academic and Faculty Enrichment (CAFE)

What are Program Learning Outcomes (PLOs)?

PLOs are outcomes that describe what students will be able to reliably demonstrate by the end of the program. They “matter in the long run.”

PLOs clearly communicate to students, faculty, industry, and the community at large the expectations about the knowledge, skills, and level of autonomy of the graduate of a program.

PLOs differ from course learning outcomes (CLOs) in that CLOs are the smaller building blocks that support the student to gain the knowledge, skills, and experience to meet the expectations outlined in the PLOs.



What are the considerations when revising PLOs?

Developing clear and accurate PLOs supports consistency between graduates of the same program or credential (e.g., apprenticeship, certificate, diploma, advanced diploma, degree, or graduate certificate) in the Ontario college system. PLOs are complex statements and should be written or revised following consultation with experts, faculty, industry, graduates, other stakeholders, and in accordance with academic policies and quality assurance requirements.

Revision to programs and new program development may identify the need for revising and/or writing PLOs. Revision to PLOs should begin with discussion with the Executive/Associate Dean and, if approved, moves forward to the manager, Academic Quality Assurance to begin discussion about timelines, forms, requirements, and resources to submit a program change for approval, funding, and credential validation. If revision of PLOs is approved, the manager, Program and Curriculum Development will provide guidance about the best practices for writing clear and measurable PLOs. The manager, Program and Curriculum Development, also facilitates writing the PLOs as part of the new program development process.

Is my program guided by a Program Standard or Program Description?

The Ministry of Colleges and Universities (MCU) oversees the development and review of Program Standards that describe the performance-based outcomes expected of a graduate of a particular program. There are more than 200 college programs with Program Standards in Ontario. When a Program Standard exists, Durham College (DC) is required to ensure programs and program delivery are consistent with these standards.

Program Standards are created using a comprehensive consultation process with employers, professional associations, industry, and program graduates currently working in the field for the program. This process helps to ensure programs are designed to meet the needs of employers and graduates gain the skills they need to be successful.

Program Standards are located on the MCU website (<http://www.tcu.gov.on.ca/pepg/audiences/colleges/progstan/>). You can search the online database by scrolling down the page and clicking on any of the six categories: Applied Arts, Business, Health Sciences, Human Services, Hospitality and Tourism, and Technology, or, you can search by descriptor or MTCU code in the Search bar at the top of the page.

When a Program Standard does not exist, colleges are required to use existing Program Descriptions supplied by MCU and updated through the [Credential Validation Service \(CVS\)](#). Program Descriptions are similar to Program Standards in that they provide performance-based outcomes, however they do not include detailed elements of performance and have not been developed using the rigorous process used when developing a Program Standard.

Program Descriptions are on a password-protected website and will need to be located with the assistance of the manager, Program and Curriculum Development.

Is there a repository where I can find the PLOs for programs at DC?

The college has a [Program Learning Outcome Repository \(PLOR\)](#), where faculty and staff are able to access and view program learning outcomes for all programs at the college. Where program standards exist, there may be two sets of program learning outcomes, a Ministry version and a local DC version. The Ministry version details the Ministry approved program standard. The DC version would reflect the modification (although modification is no longer accepted) and/or the addition of program learning outcomes to a Program Standard, which have been validated by CVS and approved by MCU.

What are the key characteristics of a well-written Program Learning Outcome?

PLOs often include one or more clear, measurable, and performance based action verbs that supports a statement about how the graduate will use and/or apply their knowledge and skills to support a particular workflow and criterion which describes the level of performance (e.g., support, assist, manage, lead, etc.) or more information about the context.

For example, “Assist in the design of characters and objects for multimedia products by applying the principles of drawing, movement, and animation.”

The outcome should be measurable and a realistic representation of the level of responsibility of the expected work and application of knowledge and skill for the graduate of the specific credential level (i.e., certificate, diploma, advanced diploma, graduate certificate, or degree).

When you begin to write and/or revise learning outcome statements, it is often easier to do so by using starters such as:

- Demonstrate an understanding of ..., or
- Understand the ..., or
- Learn how to use/apply the

Begin to write and/or revise statements by using these starters if it is helpful. Please note, these starters do not use clear, measurable, or performance based verbs but they can be used to start the process for articulating your thoughts. Once you have written out the statement, revisit it and begin to revise it by using clear, measurable, and performance based verbs, such as apply, evaluate, design, plan, create, etc. If you can identify the verb then you are on your way to developing a measureable outcome. If you do not see a clear, measurable, and performance based verb, then ask yourself what would an employer ask the graduate to do in the field?

How do I create well-written PLOs for different types of credentials?

Writing PLOs for different types of credentials can be achieved by looking at the common knowledge and skills of the graduates and then determining the differences in the depth or breadth of knowledge and/or skills for the programs. For instance, often there is a difference in the graduate from the different credentials in the amount of leadership, supervision required, or in accountability.

Some of the common ways in which this is addressed is to include different types of criterion or to use an adjective such as “complex” to differentiate between two very similar types of learning outcomes.

For example, the following three outcomes are all for a similar cluster of programs in media art design, development and management. Note the difference in the level of responsibility and skill requirements for each of the credentials.

Coordinate the development, budgeting, planning and professional presentation of a **complex** interactive media project. (Graduate Certificate)

Contribute to the development, budgeting, and planning of a professional presentation of a **complex** interactive media project. (Advanced Diploma)

Assist in the development of a professional presentation of an interactive media project. (Diploma)

What resources can I access?

Consult with program advisory committees or focus groups to determine the scope, depth, breadth and level of responsibility of a graduate, ensuring that the final outcomes also meet the guidelines of the [Ontario Qualifications Framework](#).

DC offers the following credentials:

- Certificate III
- Diploma II
- Advanced Diploma
- Post-Diploma Certificate (Graduate Certificate)
- Baccalaureate/Bachelor's Degree: Honours

Use the resources from the Program Learning Outcome section of the [CAFE website](#).