

Co-Curricular Learning Objectives for Students West Texas A&M University – Division of Student Affairs

The curricular approach to out-of-classroom learning emerged and matured as a method for developing intentional learning environments in student affairs divisions and departments within the past two decades. Curricular approaches are built off of defined learning outcomes and integrated assessments that more squarely focus the work of student affairs educators on student learning (Blimling, 2015; Kerr & Tweedy, 2006; Kerr, Tweedy, Edwards, & Kimmel, 2017). These curricula represent holistic learning plans that are designed to enhance and follow a student’s developmental journey through college. Designed with the student at the center, curricular approaches hold the promise of better assessment, continuous improvement, and ultimately improved student outcomes and retention.

Curricular approaches are grounded in the principles set forth in the Student Learning Imperative (1994), Learning Reconsidered (2004), and Learning Reconsidered 2 (2006). These documents center student learning as a primary mission of student affairs divisions, departments, and higher education institutions. The concepts behind the curricular approach rest on a collection of research and literature on contemporary college learning outcomes (ex. CAS and NACE Competencies, AAC&U Essential Learning Outcomes, etc.), student development theory (most often the work of Marcia Baxter-Magolda (2004) on self-authorship and creating learning partnerships), and the work of K-12 educators on learning objective and lesson plan development. Through this work, an approach was developed that enables institutions to be more intentional in their efforts and in their design of experiences for and with students.

What is now known as the curricular approach (or residential curriculum) began in a residence life department at the University of Delaware. In 2006, Kerr and Tweedy published “Beyond Seat Time and Student Satisfaction: A Curricular Approach to Residential Education” in *About Campus*, asserting institutions and professionals needed to shift how they measured success. This was followed up with an article in 2017, “Shifting to curricular approaches to learning beyond the classroom” (Kerr, et al., 2017), and codified in the book, *The curricular approach to student affairs: A revolutionary shift for learning beyond the classroom* (Kerr et al., 2020). Although the curricular approach started in residence life, its applicability has since been broadened to the entirety of student affairs work.

To share learning and strategies for this paradigm shift, ACPA hosted the inaugural Residential Curriculum Institute (RCI) in 2007, bringing together institutions from across the United States of America and Canada. The institute, renamed the Institute on the Curricular Approach (ICA), continues to occur yearly through ACPA. Higher education and student affairs professionals attend to learn how to begin implementing a curricular approach and to improve it effectively over time.

Although curricular approaches to learning beyond the classroom began nearly two decades years ago, research on their impact and how students experience it is still developing. Existing research on the curricular process focuses on organizational impact (Lichterman, 2016), implementation challenges and successes (Kropf, 2020), and the experiences of the staff (Pernotto, 2021). Other authors conducted studies addressing the impact of the curricular approach on students—including how a curricular approach impacts students’ personal development, community engagement, cultural exploration, and institutional commitment (Sanders, 2018), how students make meaning of the collegiate experience (Scheibler, 2021), and the impact on outcomes for students with underrepresented identities (Williams et al., 2021).

Outcomes achieved through a curricular approach are tied to the outcomes set forth by the institutions themselves. Success in achieving these outcomes are defined on a campus-by-campus basis. As an example, one campus’ residence life department showcasing at the Institute on the Curricular Approach reported that students participating in their curriculum indicated feeling a greater sense of belonging (ACPA, 2017). Furthermore, this institution shared data reflecting that students “felt more welcomed, enjoyed their floors more, felt more included on the floor, felt more challenged to think broadly about an issue, and were more likely to have worked to increase their understanding of diversity” (ACPA, 2017). As the practitioner noted, these are all factors that have been identified as increasing the likelihood of student retention (ACPA, 2017). These types of findings are frequently echoed by exemplar institutions that showcase at the Institute on the Curricular Approach. Other benefits institutions mention include decreased student conduct issues, lesser strain on institutional budgets, and staff reporting a more proactive stance when responding to student issues. Depending on the structure of one’s curriculum and its learning objectives, an institution may find these or additional benefits.

Some of the biggest strengths of utilizing a curricular approach is that it centers student learning, defines student learning, encourages intentional design in experiences that promote student learning, measures student learning with data, and then utilizes this data for continuous improvement. This “double loop assessment” process (Kennedy, 2016), is a departure from traditional student affairs practice which typically relies on one-off engagement opportunities (typically programs) that are developed as standalone departmental offerings. Curricular approaches utilize a backwards design method whereby a student’s potential learning journey is defined first, before opportunities are sequenced and scaffolded to help them in outcome achievement. This aids institutions in ways that are not possible when efforts are ad-hoc or learning objectives are ill-defined.

The Journey of a Buffalo

As a result of the student experience at West Texas A&M University, students will be challenged and motivated to grow as people of integrity to reach their full potential at WT and beyond.

Goal 1. Personal Well-Being (THRIVE): Each student will gain self-awareness and develop strategies to improve and maintain their overall well-being.

Growing in self-awareness, students will explore their strengths, values, beliefs, personality and social group identities. The campus promotes the holistic and integrated development of the mind, body, and spirit. Well-being has many dimensions including purpose, financial, physical, emotional, and community. Students will be encouraged to challenge their perspective and reframe to overcome setbacks.

Outcomes:

- 1.1 Discern the impact of societal influences on their own beliefs and values.
- 1.2 Integrate the concepts of a healthy lifestyle.
- 1.3 Evaluate setbacks as temporary events while creating a positive mindset.
- 1.4 Develop a plan for financial stability.

Alignment:

Council for the Advancement of Standards, Student Learning and Development Outcomes:

- Intrapersonal Development
- Practical Competence

National Association of Colleges and Employers, Competencies:

- Professionalism/Work Ethic

American Association of Colleges and Universities, Essential Learning Outcomes:

- Personal and Social Responsibility: Ethical reasoning and action

Goal 2. Healthy Relationships & Community (CONNECT): Each student will develop healthy relationships within a diverse, inclusive, and supportive WT community.

Outcomes:

- 2.1 Form, strengthen and end relationships in the pursuit of personal fulfillment.
- 2.2 Interact with a diverse population in a supportive and respectful manner.
- 2.3 Engage with groups whose values resonate with them.
- 2.4 Impact their community through meaningful civic engagement.

Alignment:

Council for the Advancement of Standards, Student Learning and Development

Outcomes:

- Intrapersonal Development
- Humanitarianism & Civic Engagement

National Association of Colleges and Employers, Competencies:

- Global/Intercultural Fluency
- Teamwork Collaboration

American Association of Colleges and Universities, Essential Learning Outcomes:

- Intellectual and Practical Skills: Teamwork and problem solving
- Personal and Social Responsibility: Civic knowledge and engagement—local and global
- Personal and Social Responsibility: Intercultural knowledge and competence

Goal 3. Practical Skills (ACHIEVE): Each student will develop skills and implement strategies to succeed and make an impact.

Outcomes:

3.1 Practice skills required for self-efficacy.

3.2 Demonstrate academic determination to become an engaged learner.

3.3 Pursue their personal, professional and/or career goals.

3.4 Live their authentic leadership approach.

Alignment:

Council for the Advancement of Standards, Student Learning and Development

Outcomes:

- Practical Competence

National Association of Colleges and Employers, Competencies:

- Leadership
- Career Management

American Association of Colleges and Universities, Essential Learning Outcomes, aligns with:

- Personal and Social Responsibility: Foundations and skills for lifelong learning
- Personal and Social Responsibility: Ethical reasoning and action

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