## Creating Department/Program Academic Faith Integration (AFI) Learning Outcomes

Individual teachers and particular courses are always on the frontline of AFI, as we deliver academic content to our students in which the wisdom of the Christian faith and our academic content mutually inform each other. Individual faculty and "their" courses, however, do not exist in isolation -- they are a part of a larger program with overarching goals. When students graduate, we expect them to have absorbed a number of major learnings from the entirety of a particular program of study. These are reflected in well-crafted program learning outcomes (PLOs).

The primary outcomes tend to be intuitive and obvious to those are insiders to a discipline or profession. In fact, professional accrediting bodies often impose them on academic programs. Or they may be understood informally because "everyone knows"(for example), *what makes a good marketing executive* or *a competent historian*. These outcomes may be institutionalized on the larger professional community or spelled out in scholarly studies.

The starting point, therefore, for crafting faith-based outcomes relative to the profession or discipline is in what the profession/discipline already asserts. Informed by these standards, program faculty can identify where faith-informed perspectives add to, adjust, apply, or engage with a discipline's existing knowledge base.

Consider, for example, the field of social work, utilizing a research-informed model of the profession (below).
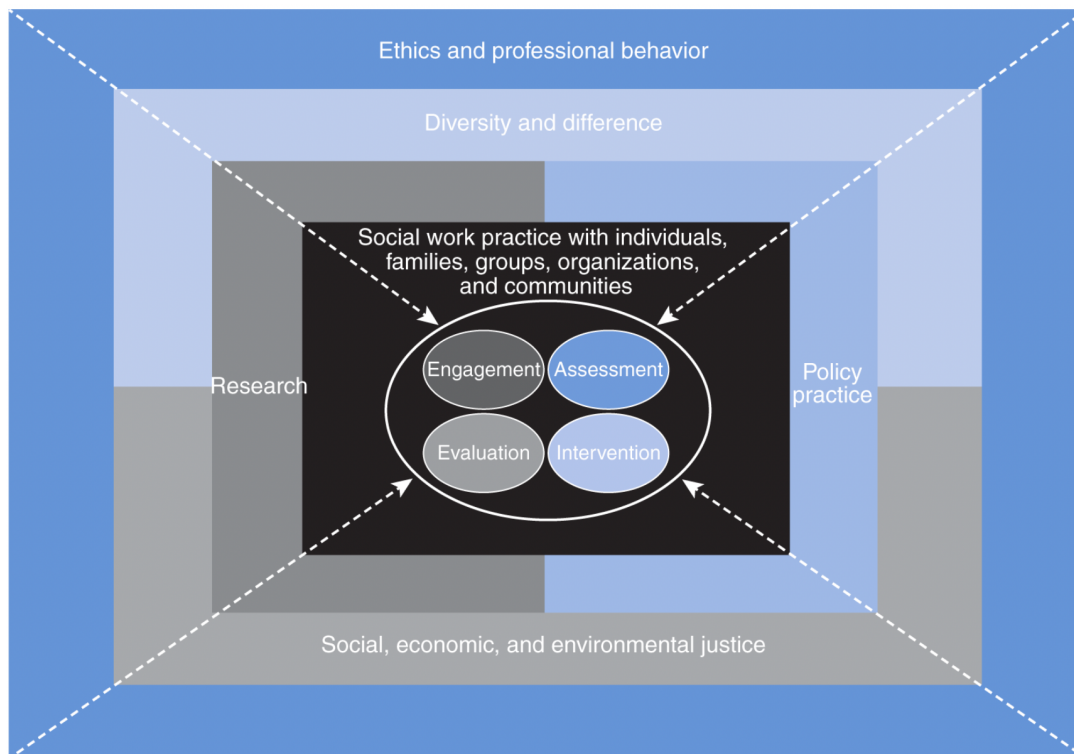
Poulin, J., et al. *Theories, Paradigms, and Professional Competencies in Social Work Practice*. New York, Springer Publishing Company**:** 3-38.
https://connect.springerpub.com/content/book/978-0-8261-7853-4/part/part01/chapter/ch01

Looking at this model, an experienced social worker/social work educator who is also a wise and mature in the Christian faith will see immediate possibilities. For example:

- ✓ The believing social worker may be convinced that there is more to a client intake (assessment) than (just) what the profession requires.
- ✓ There may be issues of policy that the Christian social worker might think about more deeply as the brings her theological knowledge into policy issues.
- ✓ The Christian social worker might appreciate how the profession embraces diversity and see that as an opportunity to equip other believers to embrace differences in God's beautiful world.
- ✓ No doubt ethics will create important dialogue(s) with faith and the profession.

Other examples could be given. The point is that in a faith-based program of learning, PLOs will certainly be more than just what the professional guild calls for. It won't be less than that; but it will – at a reasonable level – be more than that at an institution committed to a distinctly Christian approach to learning.

From there, the program faculty can consider relevant topics and questions, that can then be translated into principles reflecting key learning, and ultimately formed into program learning outcomes. Take the social work example once more:

TOPIC: Is there a way to do a bio-psycho-social client assessment that also recognizes their inherent spiritual nature and potential spiritual enrichment, but doesn't violate their autonomy?

PRINCIPLE: A faith-based social work program focuses on the client from a bio-psycho-social perspective, but also affirms that their "faith" (formal or informal, conscious or unconscious) is part of who they are. Good assessments will take people's divine design into account in learning more about them and designing a suitable care plan.

PROGRAM LEARNING OUTCOME: Upon graduation, students will be skilled in an ethical and professional approach to bio-psycho-social assessment that takes into account whole persons, made in the image of God, including their existence as spiritual beings in pursuit of authentic meaning and hope.

Particular aspects of this PLO can then be plotted progressively across the curriculum according to its relevant topics (for ex. the nature of humans as spiritual beings from a Christian perspective; the theological idea of *imago dei*; Christian views of respect for personal autonomy; ethical approaches to including faith, spirituality, religion, etc. in a care plan; places where people of faith may experience tension with their own faith/values and how to respond in a Christlike way; Jesus at the intersection of grace and truth; etc.)

Then resources can be identified (articles, books, scholars, etc.) and pedagogical strategies can be developed (lectures, discussions, activities, assignments*, projects, etc.). These resources can be shared as different faculty, including adjuncts, teach the relevant classes.

Don't forget that for assessment purposes, PLO rubrics will need to be developed. As rubrics, they should indicate a clear understanding of the item being assessed. Program faculty need to be able to 1) discern if their intended outcomes are being achieved at a satisfactory level and

2) appreciate various ways that might be achieved in classrooms. In some cases, "signature assignments" assigned (perhaps) in classes near the end of the program, may be used as evidence in the assessment process.

Other disciplines and professions have frameworks that have developed over time, reflecting their own core theories, paradigms, and competencies. This diagram from social work illustrates just one source where potential faith-related topics and principles can be detected and converted into AFI PLOs. Other places to look include
1) professional codes of ethics;
2) epistemological presuppositions and practices in the discipline;
3) historic foundations, persons, and seminal texts in the discipline or profession;
4) skills noted as necessary to the field of work students are preparing to enter.
Some of these (such as *completing paperwork in an efficient and timely manner or scheduling one's cases so that every client has sufficient connection with a professional for their situation*) may not need to be faith-integrated. But some topics can be and some topics must be. For example, social work students needs to be skilled in critical thinking, advocacy, problem solving, empathetic listening (etc.) Could any of these skills invite faith-based learning?

PROGRAM LEARNING OUTCOME: Upon graduation, students will be able to provide a research-based description of 3 core social worker skills, resources in the Christian tradition that support those skills, and demonstrate the skill of critical self-awareness in describing their own use of those skills in their field work.

Here's one final example, *within this field*, that illustrates a kind of place to look for possibilities: Social work has what it calls "Grand Challenges" (https://grandchallengesforsocialwork.org/). At some level each one appears to have potential intersection with concerns expressed by the Hebrew prophets, Jesus, and the early Christian believers. Social work students should know about the Grand Challenges and social work students in a Christian university should learn how the faith of their university informs their appreciation, analysis, and application of these challenges in the profession they are preparing for.

Furthermore, ***Christian faith/theology itself may point to topics that are not mentioned in the discipline but that faith-informed educators believe to be important***. Similarly, there may be Bible passages that demonstrate a core connection that are worth highlighting. In social work, for example, a PLO might emerge such as:

PROGRAM LEARNING OUTCOME: Upon graduation, students will be able to identify and explain how 4 core passages from the Christian Bible strengthen and clarify the call to advocate for the poor, marginalized, and disadvantaged.

In one sense, the most problematic area for creating PLOs is in the realm of **character**. As Christians (and as Christian educators) we want to see how our work with students is making them better people -- more moral, whole, spiritual, virtuous, healthy, etc. But these things are hard to measure, academically. It is difficult to create assignments that indicate whether a

person has earned an A, or B, or C (or D?!) related to the quality of their character. It is at this point that the best thing to do may be to create academic expectations that focus on understanding and in-depth reflection. Moreover, it is best, in an academic program, to link character to what the discipline or profession has identified as "good" (or ethical, etc.) in that particular field. Social work, again, provides a good example in the field 's previous mentioned Code of Ethics (https://www.socialworkers.org/About/Ethics/Code-of-Ethics/Code-of-Ethics-English). As its first value, the SW Code lists:

> **Value:** *Service*
> **Ethical Principle:** *Social workers' primary goal is to help people in need and to address social problems.*
> Social workers elevate service to others above self-interest. Social workers draw on their knowledge, values, and skills to help people in need and to address social problems.

A nice faith-informed PLO related to the SW code of ethics would be something like this:

> <u>PROGRAM LEARNING OUTCOME</u>: Upon graduation, students will be able to use faith-based sources of wisdom to explain how at least 3 of the 6 values in the SW Code of Ethics intersects with Christian virtue and to reflect on their own growth in these three values during their time in the program.

Social Work (and other professions) make their professional codes of ethics required for entry into the profession. Some are less formalized, but still identified as important. A historian, for example, might look at what the National Council of Public History lists as their ethical code (https://ncph.org/about/governance-committees/code-of-ethics-and-professional-conduct/). I am not a historian, but it seems to me that there is a lot here that could be nuanced or teased out in light of the Christian teaching (in the Bible and in the history of Christian thought) about the kind of good character the NCPH spells out. Is there a code of ethics for the field of English in particular? I couldn't find one. But I bet a small group of people from that field could identify a handful of moral-intellectual virtues that they would expect of anyone in their field. I bet, further, that there are people who've written or done research on the relevant virtues, even if they have to go back in time to find such writings.

Remember that PLOs are for those who lead and teach in the program, and for the institution at large, not for the students. Crafting good, evaluable PLOs helps us to see if we are achieving what we intend. This is important in general (apart from faith) and in terms of our faith-based mission in specific. Consider the PLO just given, above. On the one hand, if 85% of the students do a good job "reflect on their own growth in three social work values during their time in the program" then the program can rightfully claim that doing something very right. There is something to celebrate. But, on the other hand, if only 50% of students reflect well in *linking the code of ethics to Christian virtue*, then there are questions the faculty should probably ask. There might be reasonable answers, but the faculty can now have a conversation regarding how its intentions are (or are not) being intentionalized in classrooms, by teachers, with students.

To return to the start, the first step is 1) to identify a set of faith-related outcomes that meaningfully link to the discipline/profession, to the particular program, and to relevant individual classes. Then, ask 2) "can these be (by the scholar-educator-practitioner) studied, researched, investigated in sources relevant to the discipline and the Christian faith?" Program faculty need to then ask 3) "Can these areas be taught and learned in class, and in student academic work" And 4) "Can they be looked for (and hopefully, found) in student assignments, etc. for the sake of assessment?" These faith-related outcomes should be robust, interesting, important, and meaningful.

Believing, as Christian educators should, that their faith and their institution's commitment to faith-based learning is worthy, these faith-related Program Learning Outcomes should add value to student learning and to the life and work they will engage in after graduating.