Tuning: What the heck is it?

Tuning is a faculty-driven process that seeks to define and demystify degree programs. This reflective and forward-thinking process also seeks to improve the quality of teaching and learning in higher education.

Faculty gather to:

1. develop an "introduction to the discipline" that is written in layman's terms.

2. describe how the coursework in the discipline fits into other degree programs and into other areas of study.

3. enumerate occupations and types of employment that are available for persons holding the various levels of degrees in the discipline.

4. define the degree in terms of what is learned by students and what students do to achieve and demonstrate these outcomes—as opposed to defining the degree in terms of courses and credit hours. There are two types of competencies (learning outcomes) developed: discipline-specific competencies and generic competencies. Generic competencies are those things that are taught and learned in discipline courses that are not specific to the discipline.

Surveys of stakeholders (faculty, students, alumni, employers, professional schools, etc.) are performed to see how well these proposed competencies align with the needs of the various stakeholders and to see how well the degree programs are doing in accomplishing these goals.

In a cyclical process, curricula and teaching methods are revised in order to improve the quality of the learning that is achieved. In the business world, this might be described as continuous quality improvement.

Potential benefits are that students (and parents of prospective students) will be able to better understand and navigate the higher education system—thus leading to improvements in persistence and success. There are implications for transfer of credits between institutions. There are also implications for how society and potential employers view students who have completed particular degree programs. Tuning is often defined as a way to improve the "transparency" of the higher education system.
Workshop for the 22nd Annual FACET Retreat (May 21–23, 2010)

Title: Tuning Educational Structures:
A bunch of baloney (Bologna?) ... or ideas worth making our own?

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Description of Session

Consider student success. How important is it that students can understand and navigate the higher education landscape? How important is it that prospective students understand what they will learn in a degree program? How important is it that stakeholders (employers, professional schools, governments) have input into, and knowledge of, the college curriculum? How important is quality in higher education and how is it defined, demonstrated and improved?

These are some of the questions that faculty in Europe have been working on since 1999 when twenty-nine countries signed the Bologna Declaration. Out of this political agreement, the process known as “tuning” developed as a way to define degrees, and to approach curriculum reform, institutional coordination and quality assurance across the varied systems of Europe.

Tuning has recently gained traction here as policy makers have looked for new approaches to “reform” higher education and improve student success. Since April 2009, I have been part of a pilot known as Tuning USA. In this session, I will describe some of the work that is ongoing and walk attendees through some aspects of tuning. In doing so, I hope to provide some insights into how we might make this faculty-driven process our own.

As a new “big idea” in higher education, with potentially broad-ranging implications, tuning fits the “questing forward” aspect of the retreat theme. In the future, we will certainly be confronted with calls for change as pressure mounts to produce more educated citizens with less funding, while also maintaining or improving quality.

Tasks and learning objectives for the workshop

During this session, participants will:

1. be introduced to the basics of tuning and its history in Europe and the U.S.
2. write either a brief outline for “introduction to the subject area” or for “the role of the discipline in other degree programs.”
3. write one or more generic competencies and one or more discipline-specific competencies.
4. complete a survey of generic competencies.
5. reflect on ways tuning could enhance student persistence and success.
6. reflect on ways that tuning could improve the quality of higher education.