# Improving Outcomes Series –Part I:

# Suggestions to Improve Low Outcomes

By R.J. Nikola,

## ABHES Commissioner

 School owners and administrators monitor student/graduate outcomes annually to

report statistics to both their accrediting agencies and the U.S. Department of Education. Outcomes include**: Retention** (*students who stay in school through the program*); **Graduation** (*students who successfully complete their schooling*); **Credentialing** **Exams** (*proof of graduate employability*); and, **Placement** (*students who actually get jobs in their specialty field or related fields*). These outcome percentages are watched all year long because the numbers are important indicators that tell the school how well they serve their student body and alumni.

When this data changes, school administrators and take notice. When the numbers are up, they congratulate their staff and tell prospective students how well the school is performing. However, when the numbers are below minimum acceptable benchmarks (less than 70%), it usually tells the school there is room for improvement. If those outcomes remain low for more than one reporting year

(July 1st of one year to June 30th of the next year), it can affect the school’s accreditation status and

could mean the difference between the school being able to offer Title IV student financial aid or not.

What is a school to do when faced with low outcomes? The following is a list of some suggestions schools can use to evaluate how well they are responding to improve low outcome percentages, whether they fall below acceptable minimum benchmarks or not:

**1. Has student enrollment in any given program increased beyond your capacity to serve them?**

Schools tend to get excited when enrollment increases, but sometimes they forget that student support

staff needs to increase to help students succeed during their schooling. If the school does its job correctly, this assistance helps to retain students and encourage boost graduation. The same applies to

students who need a course to prepare them to take and, more importantly, pass their

credentialing/licensing exams. And, of course, the need to increase career services staff to actively

search for jobs for credentialed/licensed graduates (placement) is necessary to keep numbers up.

**2. Has student enrollment in any given program increased beyond the capacity to employ them?**

When schools add a new program, they perform a detailed market analysis to make sure the program

is going to be profitable and that jobs are available for graduates. Sometimes their market analysis

focuses on national forecasts from the U.S. Bureau of Labor & Statistics for the coming years, but fails

to create local models. They ask local employers questions like, “*Have you hired someone in this*

*profession in the past year?*’ or ‘*Do you plan on hiring someone in this profession in the next year?*”

Questions to ask themselves include: “*Are my competitors offering the same program?*’ ‘*How many*

*graduates are my competitors sending out in the field each year?*’ and ‘*Can the local market absorb*

*my graduates in addition to theirs?*”

These questions are not difficult to ask, but the answers are occasionally difficult to hear. As a

result, schools rarely probe into these matters. When this happens, placement outcomes may suffer.

Sometimes the only way to correct this market downturn is to limit or cap enrollment to exactly the

number of graduates that were placed the previous year, or increase career services staff as mentioned

above in question #1. If placement numbers are well below acceptable benchmarks, the school may

want to look at temporarily ceasing enrollment until the market corrects itself. Occasionally when

the market fails to correct itself or when placement numbers are embarrassingly low, drastic measures

must be taken. This may include discontinuing a program until such time as the local market can support graduate employment in the field again.

**3. What should a school do when its graduates do not take or receive poor scores on**

**credentialing/licensing exams?**

Sometimes the vocation in question may have no local or state credentialing/licensing required. Regardless of the jurisdiction in which the school/campus resides, graduates may move to an area that does have credentialing/licensing laws. Therefore, it is a safe bet to prepare students to take and pass

these exams while the information is still fresh in their minds.

Several variables can negatively affect credentialing/licensing exam outcomes. This may be something as simple as graduates being unable to afford the exam fee. One solution for the school is to pay for the exam when students

graduate on time. This solves two problems: graduates not taking the exam and on-time

completion rates reported to the DOE (*U.S. Dept. of Education*). Another solution may be for the school to have a little faith in their graduates by shouldering the exam fees up front and allowing graduates to pay the interest free loan over a six-month period after they become employed. Yet another solution is to share the burden of the exam fee with the graduate, or better yet add the expense to the overall cost of attendance on the front end.

If, however, the problem is low or failing scores on the credentialing/licensing exams, responsibility

falls solely with the school. Either current students do not possess the capacity to pass the exams,

wherein the school needs to raise admission criteria to an acceptable level, or the school’s curriculum

is insufficient to prepare its graduates to pass the exams. Before revamping the program syllabi and

lesson plans to a higher educational standard, the solution may be as easy as offering graduates

a free exam preparation workshop and/or picking up the nominal cost of commercially available

online practice exams.

**Conclusion**

These are only some shared suggestions to help schools improve low outcomes. There may

be other more pertinent issues involved and effective solutions that could work with the unique circumstances each school may face. The important thing to remember is to keep your options open by searching for creative solutions among your own staff, students, and advisory board members. Then prioritize this list of possible solutions by probable workability and use them immediately. Finally, don’t forget to ask your accrediting body representative what other schools are doing to solve the same issues.

**Mr. Nikola** has been a massage therapist, educator and author for more than 20 years. He owns Healing Mountain Massage School with

two campuses in Utah. He currently serves as a commissioner (*member of the Board of Trustees and Executive Committee*) in a volunteer capacity for the Accrediting Bureau of Health Education Schools (ABHES).