**Abstract**

By asking faculty members to write, and then analyze, a letter of reference for an "ideal student," we help faculty members: move beyond a list of outcomes to a few integrative phrases that capture central program goals; articulate how institutional general education outcomes relate to student work in disciplinary courses; articulate what these institutional outcomes "look like" in specific disciplines; and recognize that student attitudes and behaviors (for instance in the LEAP "personal and social responsibility" outcome group) constitute important student learning outcomes. Students benefit when faculty members can more clearly articulate these relationships: they not only acquire a "compass" (in LEAP terms), but also they learn that they share with faculty "a culture of shared purpose."

**Introduction**

If the strength of a chain rests on the weakest link, we suggest that institutional-level student learning outcomes are only as strong or useful as the connection that is made to them by faculty within their discipline and in their courses. To be effective, the ownership of general education outcomes needs to be held institution wide. This activity is designed to assist faculty in making the connections that lead to ownership of institutional student learning outcomes.

Faculty tend to resist the tasks of identifying student learning outcomes and constructing rubrics to describe the characteristics of novices, intermediates and experts. Moreover, when they do list student learning outcomes, they list too many outcomes without considering priorities, primary/secondary outcomes, or outcomes which subsume others. Faculty, all good students themselves, believe that they are “supposed to” come up with such a comprehensive list.
Naturally, it's intimidating to think about defining rubrics for each of these outcomes, let alone coming up with an assessment process.

**The Promising Practice**

We have devised a way to help faculty identify and, in turn, “own” the most important of their goals for student learning, using a genre that faculty are familiar with: the recommendation letter.

**Goals**

The goals of this promising practice are for faculty to:

- use a familiar activity—writing a reference letter—to produce relevant student learning outcomes.
- get past the stereotypical laundry list of outcomes to identify key outcomes for their programs.
- describe multiple types of outcomes; e.g., holistic, behavioral, developmental, and academic.
- distinguish discipline-specific outcomes from institutional general education outcomes and then reconnect them.

**Methodology**

The prompt is simple:

Write a recommendation letter for an ideal student in your program who is a new graduate, applying for graduate school or a job. In the letter, describe the graduate in terms that are important to you and to those you are writing to—like you normally would. Include some of the following:

- What kind of person will this graduate be?
- What will they be able to do?
- What will they know?
- What skills will they have?
- How will they behave?
- What will they value?

Note: When the focus is on department outcomes, we add this sentence: You can assume that these graduates have already met (in general) the institutional student learning outcomes. ([http://serc.carleton.edu/departments/programs/idealstudent.html](http://serc.carleton.edu/departments/programs/idealstudent.html))

A sample letter for a fictional chemistry student, Ester Isomer, is attached to this proposal.
In practice
Often, we ask faculty members to draft these "ideal student" reference letters as homework before a workshop session on assessment. We also have used this exercise successfully in the following contexts:

1. We ask faculty to dissect the "Ester Isomer" letter and write student learning outcomes based on the letter for the chemist who wrote the letter.
2. From the "ideal student" letters that faculty in a single department submit, we (as workshop facilitators) identify the commonalities and the differences among the faculty to help departments focus on goals. Subsequently, we ask the department faculty to work together to construct a diagram showing the interlocking of goals and the priority of certain ones.
3. We ask faculty from different departments to critique each other's letters, in order to help the letter writer express integrative outcomes more clearly and begin a discussion of assessment from the most important goals.
4. The "ideal student" letters become a springboard to help faculty see that phrases like "works well in groups," "cheerful and intellectually mature," "sees connections between academic and co-curricular activities" are descriptive of real student learning outcomes, just as much as "demonstrates critical thinking ability." In fact, they may actually be more meaningful. Students develop attributes like these while they are at college: we think they are important enough to write about in our recommendation letters, therefore, they must be student learning outcomes of the same status as the typical content and skills outcome. Discussions about these "ineffable" attributes then merge seamlessly into a discussion of such LEAP outcomes as "personal and social responsibility" and "teamwork."

Therefore
In the process of writing and then analyzing an "ideal student" letter, faculty come to see that the main student learning outcomes for their programs can be articulated in ways that encompass the particulars of content and skills. As the Ester Isomer letter writer says, "to approach problems as a mature chemist would" means that Ester "knows how to ask good questions, . . . where to go to start getting answers . . . in the literature, . . . in conversation with other chemists, or . . . through experimentation."

Although ostensibly related specifically to chemistry, the skills embedded here are, in fact, general education outcomes of inquiry and analysis, problem-solving, information literacy, and synthesis skills "flavored" by the specific discipline. They are what general education looks like through a chemistry lens; chemistry students develop these skills from their first chemistry class — and from the other courses they take.

We also work with faculty at other institutions who have a difficult time articulating how the work they do with students in geology, for instance, relates in any way to institutionally derived student learning outcomes (most of which are "general education."). This exercise helps faculty make those connections explicit, starting with the disciplinary language most familiar to them. In doing so, faculty come to "own" those institutional outcomes and can then articulate to students
the relationship between their coursework and department requirements, and achieving the institutional outcomes.

**Student learning**
Assessment can be framed in many different ways, but for faculty perhaps the most helpful way is that once student learning outcomes are articulated in meaningful ways (on the assignment, course, program and institutional levels), faculty and staff will find them easier to share with students and students will then have a clearer road map/compass (LEAP Principle of Excellence 2) to follow. They will understand the relationship of each of the myriad parts of the college experience to the "something bigger" they are headed to. Although this proposal focuses on a way to help faculty articulate student learning goals, it is tied into student learning in several ways. First, by helping faculty to see that student attitudes and behaviors, including personal and social responsibility (LEAP Principle of Excellence 6) as demonstrated as much by the process of student work as the product, are authentic learning outcomes, faculty can become better teachers and facilitators of these attitudes and behaviors. Students will recognize that attitudes and behaviors (like tolerance for ambiguity, and increased confidence) are tangible learning outcomes. Secondly, as faculty increase their ability to describe the main, integrative goal of a program, students will increasingly have an endpoint in mind. (In the Ester Isomer letter, "approaching problems as a mature chemist" is such an endpoint). These integrative statements then become the basis of a "culture of shared purpose" (LEAP Principle of Excellence 7).

**Proposed Session**

This session works at two levels: first, we ask participants to focus on writing, critiquing and evaluating a reference letter; second, participants will distinguish department level outcomes from institutional level outcomes and make sense of the relationship between them. To juxtapose these two perspectives brings student learning into a whole picture. This method allows participants to express the qualities that are most valued and then see how those qualities play out as discipline specific or institution-wide as in general education.

**Timeline**

1. (15 minutes) - **Introduction** by presenters:
   - Provide context
   - Describe the multiple ways we use this exercise
   - Q & A regarding the creation of the activity

2. (20 minutes) – **Critique “Ideal Student” reference letter**
   At tables, participants work through "Ester Isomer" letter (attached):
   - **Identity important qualities**: Underline the (few) sentences and phrases that show what the writer of this letter most values in this student's work. These will be the essential student learning outcomes. (In this letter, these phrases include: "sees the connections between her academic experiences," "is able to connect her knowledge from outside of her chemistry courses to that which she does in class," and "knows how to approach problems as a mature chemist would.")
• **Diagram the qualities**: Placing these broader integrative phrases at the center, draw a diagram showing the relationship of the more specific qualities to the more holistic, integrative phrases.

• **Connect to LEAP**: Identify how the integrative phrases relate to the LEAP essential learning outcomes and principles of excellence (for instance, add these LEAP elements to your picture)

• **Highlight ineffable qualities**: If it hasn't already come up in the table discussions, make certain that participants recognize phrases like "pushing the edges of the information," "take the project in a direction of their own choosing," "excellent group-member," "patient when working with others," and "cheerful as she goes about her tasks" as valid student learning outcomes (i.e. things students have learned how to do - or improved at - while working in academic situations at college). Some of these qualities link independence, leadership ability, and other "ineffable" outcomes to assessment work.

• **Group discussion** (key points from each table).

3. **(20 minutes) Highlight general education**

   Using Carleton’s Institutional Learning Outcomes as an example:
   - Map the diagram of outcomes from Ester Isomer’s reference letter to Carleton’s list of outcomes and to the draft rubrics to measure them.
     - In what ways do they differ?
     - Can you imagine different departments using this exercise to own the general education outcomes?
     - What are the challenges?
     - What are the benefits?
     - How does this process enlighten the connection between the discipline and general education values and outcomes?

4. **(15 minutes) - Participant Q&A**

   Some prompting questions:
   - What was the most difficult part of drafting the letter?
   - The presenters have evidence that this exercise works in a variety of settings with faculty members. What is the evidence that it might work on your own campus? What will the barriers be?
   - What are the next steps, once one or two integrative student learning outcomes are defined in this way?

**Student involvement**

Although not applicable within this workshop session, this activity has a student-level component. Students can be explicitly involved in the processes of both evaluating and constructing "ideal student" reference letters. This might have several positive outcomes, including increasing student understanding of the kinds of things faculty care about, as shown by their letters. Students may be surprised to find out that attitudes and outcomes such as teamwork skills, synthesis, and foundations for lifelong learning (LEAP Essential Learning Outcomes)
count for as much as a perfect product. In practice, we acknowledge that reference letters aren't a common genre for student writing and the challenge would be to provide an activity where students don’t get hung up on a rhetorical task that works so well for faculty. That said, tweaking the prompt to make the outcome more of a reflection by an individual student might accomplish positive results.

**Multiple perspectives**
This proposal combines perspectives of different organizational roles. Deborah Gross is a faculty member who had the original insight of using recommendation letters. Mary Savina is Carleton's "Faculty Assessment Coordinator," working out of the Dean of the College office who collaborates with Cherry Danielson, an assessment professional to help departments and programs develop their own assessment processes. Carol Ormand is a Principal Investigator for the Building Strong Geoscience Departments program and in her role of analyzing workshop evaluations has seen the positive effects of this exercise.

**Effective practice**
Since its creation as an exercise for an assessment workshop last fall (2009), the Ideal Student exercise has proved to be an effective and versatile activity in a variety of circumstances. In addition to workshop settings, we have used the questions from this exercise as we work directly with departments and interdisciplinary programs as they develop outcomes and assessment processes.

These exercises were used at several visiting workshops conducted in 2009-10 under the National Science Foundation-funded "Building Strong Geoscience Departments" program (http://serc.carleton.edu/departments/index.html; http://serc.carleton.edu/departments/visitingworkshops/index.html). We have a particularly rich set of faculty comments evaluating the workshops. The following comment described the most valuable aspect of the workshop:

“As an administrator, I'm interested in this kind of directed faculty reflection for all departments in the college. I found reflection on the characteristics of successful departments, construction of a multi-year plan for assessment (the long spreadsheet that made sense) and the analysis of recommendation letters for the "ideal student" from the program to be very helpful tools to elicit productive reflection by the faculty, especially as related to assessment.”

The "ideal student" exercise was integrated into several of these workshops, at institutions ranging from liberal arts colleges to state universities. Even with a wide range of perspectives of and connection to general education outcomes, this exercise successfully encouraged faculty to imagine and describe how both discipline specific and general education learning outcomes are displayed within the discipline at all types of institutions.