

October 12, 2007

TO: Department Chairs and Program Directors

FROM: Jim May

RE: Request to develop statements of intended learning outcomes for majors and concentrations

As part of a continuing effort to gather evidence about student learning that is helpful to our work as teachers, and on the recommendation of the curriculum committee, I ask each department and program to develop statements of intended learning outcomes for each major or concentration for which you are responsible. Details of this request follow. We will allow time to discuss this project at the next leadership meeting, October 18, when David Booth (Curriculum Committee chair) and Jo Beld (Office of Institutional Research and Evaluation) will field questions. I thank you in advance for your leadership in this effort.

Goal:

By April 6, 2008, each department and interdisciplinary program will send to the Director of Evaluation and Assessment a list of intended learning outcomes for each of its major and concentration programs to be posted on the department or program website and on the assessment pages of the Institutional Research and Evaluation website. The list of intended learning outcomes should include at least 3-5 outcomes distinctive to the major or concentration and selected college-wide outcomes featured prominently in the curriculum for majors.

Rationale for undertaking this work:

- 1. Making intended learning outcomes explicit and public can strengthen teaching and learning.** Clearly-stated intended learning outcomes can:
 - Strengthen the focus and coherence of a program and provide a basis for setting program priorities;
 - Strengthen student understanding of course and assignment goals, and support students as they work to accomplish those goals;
 - Foster more intentional collaboration across departments and disciplines, by highlighting shared instructional goals;
 - Assist advisers as they help students develop their educational plans;
 - Provide a basis for mission-driven, meaningful, and manageable assessment of student learning.
 - Assist faculty members preparing grant applications to support curriculum or pedagogical innovations.

- 2. The process of developing intended learning outcomes can foster collegiality and intellectual engagement within and across departments and programs.** Experience at St. Olaf to date in crafting and conveying statements of intended learning outcomes for general education requirements stimulated important disciplinary and inter-disciplinary conversations

about teaching and learning. Other institutions report that developing learning outcomes statements at the program level can help build community, especially in programs with new faculty or staff.

3. **Explicitly-stated intended learning outcomes can advance the mission of other academic and administrative units at the College.** Many offices and programs affect, and are affected by, the learning objectives of departments and interdisciplinary programs. Examples include the Office of Admissions, the College Libraries, the Center for Experiential Learning, the Office of International and Off-Campus Studies, and the Academic Support Center. Clear statements of learning goals in departments and programs can strengthen the ability of these offices to support the work of faculty elsewhere in the College, and can inform the statements these offices are likely to develop.
4. **Meeting this goal by April 2008 is significant for St. Olaf's re-accreditation.** Our next assessment progress report is due to the Higher Learning Commission of the North Central Association in January 2010 (three years in advance of our next re-accreditation self-study in 2013). Among other things, this report must include specific evidence of the following:
 - (a) "The completion of the articulation of learning objectives for all programs;"
 - (b) "Specific documentation of the engagement of faculty in assessment of student learning;"
 - (c) "Real and specific examples of how assessment data inform academic decision-making."

If learning outcomes are in place shortly after spring break 2008, we will have completed work on the first requirement and laid the foundation for progress toward the second and third prior to the January 2010 deadline.

Guidelines for meeting this goal:

1. **All departments and interdisciplinary programs offering majors and/or concentrations should participate in the intended learning outcome development process.**
2. **The programs of study for which statements of intended learning outcomes should be prepared this year include all majors and all concentrations offered by the department or interdisciplinary program.** If a department or program wishes to develop additional statements of intended learning outcomes for more narrowly-defined programs of study (e.g., an emphasis within a major), they are welcome to do so. The current priority, however, is majors and concentrations.
3. **Statements of intended learning outcomes should include two components: (a) *Distinctive outcomes:* A list of 3-5 outcomes that are distinctive to each program, and (b) *Shared outcomes:* A list of 3-5 college-wide outcomes that are most significant for each program. The Office of Institutional Research and Evaluation has prepared a form for this purpose that departments may complete if they wish.**

The recommended limit of 3-5 departmentally-distinctive outcomes is intended to keep this project manageable. In making this recommendation, the Curriculum Committee

acknowledges that, in reality, many, if not most, departments espouse more than five departmentally-distinctive objectives for their programs of instruction, and that all departments serve students in addition to majors and concentrators. Thus, the list of 3-5 outcomes that a department chooses to disseminate will necessarily be selective. We encourage departments and programs to consider the following two questions in selecting their “short list” of intended outcomes: (1) What are our priority goals for our majors or concentrators? (2) What would we most like to know about what our majors know, can do, or care about?

The recommendation that departments identify relevant college-wide outcomes that complement their departmentally-distinctive outcomes is also intended to make this process more manageable. A department could affirm the outcomes associated with the two or three General Education requirements that are most frequently met by courses offered in the program

(http://www.stolaf.edu/offices/arp/Assessment/Intended_Learning_Outcomes_for_General_Education.htm). There are also other intended learning outcomes that most faculty would see as the consequence of a student’s entire undergraduate program, irrespective of his or her major, concentration, or selection of GE courses. Examples include critical thinking, effective writing, quantitative reasoning, global understanding, and information literacy. The Curriculum Committee anticipates that, eventually, these will be identified and defined through a college-wide process similar to that used to develop intended learning outcome statements for each GE requirement. Rather than asking each department or program to define these at the outset, we recommend that they simply be included on the department’s list of broader outcomes to which it contributes through its major or concentration.

4. **Program statements should parallel the phrasing of the GE learning outcome statements.** The statement associated with WRI courses is reproduced below as an example:

Students will demonstrate:

1. The ability to write effectively in a form appropriate to a particular disciplinary or interdisciplinary course of study.
2. The ability to write as a means for inquiry, learning, thinking, and communicating.
3. The ability to engage in writing as a systematic, iterative process, using flexible strategies for generating drafts, responding to feedback, revising, editing, and proofreading.

5. **Departments and programs should take advantage of available resources to make the intended learning outcomes development process easier.** Such resources include:

- Advice for developing effective statements of intended learning outcomes on the assessment website of the Office of Institutional Research and Evaluation (IR&E): <http://www.stolaf.edu/offices/arp/Assessment/DevEffectStatements.html>
- Statements about teaching and learning in relevant disciplinary or interdisciplinary professional associations
- Statements of intended learning outcomes or instructional goals in the same department or program at other institutions

6. **In the spirit of peer review, departments and programs should consult with others throughout the process.** The purpose of consultation would *not* be to evaluate whether the intended learning outcomes were the “right” ones for that program. Rather, consultation can help departments identify and frame similar or complementary learning objectives, and test the extent to which learning outcome statements are clear to those who are less familiar with the program and/or its disciplinary foundation(s). Departments and programs might seek feedback from:
- Other St. Olaf programs or departments in the same Faculty
 - Other St. Olaf programs or departments whose courses may be recommended or required for the major or concentration
 - Other St. Olaf programs or departments with no particular relationship to the department seeking feedback, to test the clarity of the department’s statement
 - Members of other administrative or academic offices, such as CEL, IOS, and ASC, or the College libraries
 - Members of the Assessment Subcommittee or the larger Curriculum Committee
 - The Director of Evaluation and Assessment

We anticipate College support for consultation across departments and programs in the following ways:

- Draft statements, including a departmental contact, will be posted on the Curriculum Committee website
- Short workshops for departments to share draft statements with one another will be hosted by the Office of Evaluation and Assessment at the beginning and end of January.
- Funding for refreshments for inter-departmental consultation sessions will be available from the Office of Institutional Research and Evaluation.