

General Education Assessment Report 2011

Conrad Shumaker, Director of General Education

The General Education Council Assessment Subcommittee undertook two main tasks in the area of assessment this year. First, the committee developed a timeline for putting in place several aspects of assessment and met with the provost to ensure that the timeline was workable and would be implemented. Included in the timeline are such items as assessment of individual courses, focus groups, and the implementation of a standardized exam (the ETS Proficiency Profile). Second, the committee developed a process for evaluating assessment in general education courses, to ensure that the departments offering the courses are assessing the ways in which they meet the goals and objectives of the overall program. The committee first looked at the original course proposals of 14 courses, to see just what assessment plan had been included as part of the course proposal. Since the original course proposals were approved at a time when the standards for assessment were perhaps not as rigorous as they are now, we evaluated the proposals to let departments know where we found them to be lacking and made suggestions for strengthening the plans. Then we looked at data that we had been gathering since 2008 but hadn't had a way to evaluate systematically, and we compared the data to the original plans to see just what the data showed in terms of following the plan and achieving the appropriate objectives. In order to facilitate the process, the committee developed a matrix designed to present the information in a clear and concise form.

What follows is a summary of the Assessment Subcommittee's findings, organized by department. The General Education Council will evaluate the assessment plans and the data gathered by a similar number of departments in the fall semester, and will continue the process in subsequent semesters until all the courses have been covered as quickly as is reasonably possible. In addition the Council plans to revisit the courses in which changes in assessment procedures were recommended and then to re-evaluate the assessment procedures of $\frac{1}{4}$ of the general education courses each year.

Note: The evaluations below should be read keeping in mind that in most cases the departments have been doing what they said they would do as part of their original plan, which was approved by the General Education Council when the course proposal was first presented. In the view of the General Education Assessment Subcommittee, our standards for assessment should in many cases be higher than they were when those proposals were approved, but the departments have been acting in good faith insofar as they have been following the plans they submitted.

Summary of Evaluation of Course Assessment:

Geography 1300

The department uses a survey instrument to assess student outcomes in area knowledge, skills, and attitudes and values. The goal is that at least 70% of students will mark that they "strongly agree" or "agree" with each of the objectives. The department has been meeting these goals, with at least 80% of students agreeing in each area (see attached table).

Conclusions and Recommendations: The committee finds that the questionnaire is an appropriate tool for measuring attitudes and values, and students' perception of the extent to which they are gaining knowledge and skills can help to illuminate the way in which the course is succeeding or not succeeding, but we recommend that student knowledge and skills outcomes be measured directly, e.g. by administering a test to measure student area knowledge and/or reading a certain number of randomly selected assignments to ensure that students really are demonstrating the area knowledge and skills the course purports to teach.

Geography 1305

The department uses the same procedure and the same survey that it uses in GEOG 1300 to assess student outcomes in this course. As in GEOG 1300, the results were positive, with over 80% agreeing on each question.

Conclusions and Recommendations: As in the case of GEOG 1300, the committee finds that the questionnaire is an appropriate tool for measuring attitudes and values, but we recommend that student area knowledge and skills outcomes be measured directly, e.g. by examination and/or reading a certain number of randomly selected assignments to ensure that students really are demonstrating the area knowledge and skills the course purports to teach.

History 1310, 1320

The History Department has instituted an assessment procedure that is more thorough than the one originally included in the course proposals. In these courses, the department administers a basic quiz at both the beginning and the end of the semester to gauge students' relative progress in knowledge of the subject and records the average increase in student scores. To measure progress in the skill of critical thinking, students analyze a historical primary document at the beginning and end of the course. The students answer three (3) multiple-choice questions based entirely upon a historical passage, and the average increase in scores is noted. Finally, to measure attitudes and values, the department has students answer two questions designed to gauge the extent to which the courses have increased the students' awareness of diversity and cultures, as well as of value systems. The attached table summarizes the results of this approach for 2010.

Conclusions and Recommendations: History seems to be doing an appropriate job of assessing the way in which these courses are meeting the World Cultural Traditions area and attitudes and values goals and objectives within the General Education Program. The measurement of critical thinking skills could be expanded to include other aspects of critical thinking. The committee recommends that, in addition to looking at the measure of critical thinking, the department set targets in each area: What percentages should be seen as representing a satisfactory level of improvement in student scores or increased awareness of cultures and diversity? For example, is a 4-year average of a 6% increase in student scores on the area knowledge quiz an acceptable outcome? Attrition rates in some semesters (i.e. the difference between numbers taking the pre-test and those taking the post-test) are also quite high (in many cases over 25%). Does the department have an explanation for the difference between the numbers taking the pre- and post-tests in those semesters? Another possible concern is the relative scarcity of assessment information on concurrent enrollment courses. The same tools are being used to measure student outcomes in these courses, but in general the lack of data in some cases and the attrition rates show that more attention is needed to ensure that concurrent enrollment courses are accomplishing what they should.

History 2301, 2302

The History Department follows the procedures summarized above in these two courses: pre-and post-tests to measure area knowledge and skills and questions to measure increased awareness of cultures, diversity, and value systems. The attached table summarizes the results of this approach for 2010.

Conclusions and Recommendations: This seems to be an appropriate approach to assessing the way in which these courses are meeting the American History and Government area and attitudes and values goals and objectives within the General Education Program. As with the World History course assessment, the measurement of critical thinking skills could be expanded to address other aspects of critical thinking, and the committee recommends the establishment of target percentages for the increase in student scores. Attrition rates in some semesters are also quite high, and there are similar problems with assessment data from concurrent enrollment courses.

Linguistics/World Languages 2350

The Department of World Languages developed a survey instrument for its cultural traditions courses, which was adapted and administered to all sections of this class, including those sections taught through the Department of Writing and Speech. In addition, the department relies on grades administered by faculty members teaching the course. Ninety percent of students are expected to earn a C or better. Results are summarized in the attached table.

Conclusions and Recommendations: While grades assigned by faculty are certainly the primary measure of assessing individual student performance, and a questionnaire is an appropriate tool for measuring attitudes and values, the committee recommends that the department develop direct measures of assessing area knowledge and skills outcomes that go beyond faculty assessment of individual student performance, e.g. a common exam to measure area knowledge outcomes, having a group of faculty

members read a certain number of randomly selected assignments, or some other direct measure to ensure that students really are demonstrating a grasp of the area knowledge and skills the course purports to teach.

Political Science 1300

The Political Science department's original proposal planned to assess student outcomes in this course based on two major tools: The syllabi for the course were to be examined by the chair to ensure they include appropriate assignments, and a General Education Assessment of the Behavioral & Social Sciences Questionnaire was to be given to students. In practice, the survey has not been given; rather, syllabi are examined by the chair and a 25-question, multiple-choice exam is administered to test area knowledge.

Conclusions and Recommendations: The committee finds that the proposed questionnaire would be an appropriate tool for measuring attitudes and values, but the quiz which has actually been used is more appropriate for measuring area knowledge. Examining syllabi and assignments to measure the extent to which the students are achieving area knowledge, skills, and attitudes and values outcomes can help to illuminate the way in which the instructors are addressing those outcomes, but we recommend that skills outcomes in particular be measured directly, e.g. by reading a certain number of randomly selected assignments to ensure that students really are demonstrating the skills the course purports to teach. The measurement of attitudes and values outcomes might be addressed more directly as well. The original assessment report form, which was apparently provided to the department by the Provost's Office, was difficult to reconcile with the objectives of General Education, since it includes both GE objectives and wider program objectives without clearly distinguishing between them. Therefore, the department chair is working with the committee to revise the form so that outcomes can be reported in a way that shows more clearly how the course is achieving the objectives (area knowledge, skills, and attitudes and values) of the GE program.

Political Science 1330

According to a revised version of the original proposal, a "general Departmental Assessment questionnaire" will be administered in each section of the course. Specific questions on this exam will address each of the American History and Government and the Behavioral and Social Sciences area objectives. "Sixty percent of students, who complete the course, will select the correct items on the general Departmental Assessment questionnaire." This seems unclear—will 60% of students achieve perfect scores, or will all students score 60% or better? Technology and Computer literacy will be assessed by a written project on a topic that the individual instructor assigns. This assignment will be examined by individual instructors, who will also "determine his/her pass rate on the written assignment." No target pass rate is specified. There is no process spelled out for collecting and evaluating student performance on this assignment, so presumably the instructor's grade will measure student outcomes. Attitudes and values assessment is addressed by each instructor's exams and by questions on the 25-item exam. In practice, the 25-question exam has been administered to assess area knowledge; it uses a mean score, rather than a percentage of students passing to measure success—

probably a preferable measure and certainly clearer than the original proposal, but a target score should be specified. The assignment to measure skills is covered by the chair's examination of materials submitted by the instructor. Presumably passing grades on assignments along with the chair's examination of syllabi to ensure that they include appropriate assignments is taken as evidence that the skills are being attained. The outcome measured by student responses to the attitudes and values questions is not reported separately from the overall mean score.

Conclusions and Recommendations: As in the case of PSCI 1300, the department seems to be measuring area knowledge appropriately by using the exam. Skills outcomes should be measured more directly, e.g. by reading a certain number of randomly selected assignments using a clear rubric to ensure that students really are demonstrating the skill the course purports to teach. The lack of a clear procedure for reporting attitudes and values outcomes should be addressed. Once again, the form for reporting the assessment outcomes is being revised to fit the GE objectives more clearly.

Political Science 2300

In this course, as in PSCI 1300, area knowledge is measured by the chair's examination of syllabi and instructor's materials and a 25-question, multiple-choice exam. The criterion for success on the exam is "an aggregate class average of 72 percent (18 correct answers out of 25 questions) for each section of the course that is taught." The skills and attitudes and values outcomes are measured through the chair's examination of syllabi and assignments: Success in these areas is measured by "the determination by the chair of the department that the course includes at least one reading, writing, or discussion (in-class or online) assignment for each of the six 'skills' objectives and two 'attitudes/values' objectives."

Conclusions and Recommendations: Here, as in the other PSCI courses, the committee recommends an assignment to measure skills outcomes, e.g. a paper to be read by someone other than the instructor of record using an appropriate rubric. A survey instrument or some part of the 25-question exam could be used to assess the attitudes and values outcomes in addition to the chair's examination of syllabi and other materials.

Philosophy 1330

The original proposal refers to a survey and a random sampling of assignments to show that 80% of students "will have achieved a satisfactory or higher understanding of these objectives based on their overall course work (final grade)." However, there is no description of a process: e.g. how large the sample will be, who will evaluate it, whether the final grade will be the determining factor in assessing a "satisfactory understanding" or whether there will be an independent assessment of the sample. Similarly, under skills assessment the proposal states, "Each instructor will collect examples of students' written assignments that may be reviewed periodically by department members, accreditation agencies and other outside evaluators." There is no description of a specific process or schedule for collecting or reviewing the sample assignments. The survey mentioned above is to measure the attitudes and values outcomes. The data provided by the Philosophy and Religion Department reports that 75% or more of students in

Philosophy World Cultural Traditions classes showed the desired outcomes in area knowledge and skills, and over 75% agreed with the statements on the survey. This is different from the stated goal, probably through simple oversight, since a look at the figures shows that the positive responses to the survey questions regularly exceed the 80% mark. The data also show that a large majority of students answered positively when asked about their achievements in area knowledge, skills, and attitudes and values.

Conclusions and Recommendations: The committee recommends that the department clarify the assessment process by answering the questions about sample size, evaluation process, and schedule for assessing the courses posed above.

Religion 1320

The original proposal refers to analysis of students' performance on examinations and writing assignments; faculty review of "a random sampling of assignments" will show "that 80% of students have achieved a satisfactory or higher understanding of the area objectives." To assess the skills outcomes, "Analysis of writing assignments will show that at least 80% of the students demonstrate a satisfactory or higher proficiency in each of the critical thinking objectives." A survey will measure the attitudes and values outcomes. As in the case of PHIL 1330, the process for analyzing the assignments is not very clearly spelled out. The data from the department show that at least 75% of students in World Cultural Traditions classes are achieving the desired outcomes (see my comment on the discrepancy in target percentages and reported percentages above) but doesn't specify how this has been measured. The data also show that a large majority of students answered positively when asked about their achievements in area knowledge, skills, and attitudes and values.

Conclusions and Recommendations: The committee recommends that the department clarify the assessment process by answering the questions about sample size, evaluation process, and schedule for assessing the courses posed above.

Writing 1310

The Writing Department recently set up a pilot study to assess WRTG 1310 and used the results from that study to develop its current assessment strategy for the course. The study was first implemented in the Spring of 2010, sampling a limited number of student papers. It has been instituted as a regular practice beginning in Fall 2010. According to the plan, 10% of submitted 1310 papers from each semester are evaluated by a team of faculty members; each paper is read by 2 evaluators, using a rubric that reflects the course objectives. If the scores given by the two readers vary by more than a grade point or are on the cusp of acceptable/unacceptable, a third reader is used. Results from the pilot study showed that the student papers were adequate in 7 areas but inadequate in 14 others. The results from the first official assessment in Fall 2010 show considerable improvement: "According to the mode scores (the most frequently occurring number), . . . students performed adequately in all areas. However, according to the mean scores (the average of scores in each area), [there were] some areas in

which students performed inadequately.” Based on these data, the department is focusing faculty discussion on the problem areas (see attached table).

Conclusions: The Writing Department and its Director of Composition are to be commended for their serious approach to assessing WRTG 1310, and their assessment strategy is clearly gathering very important information about student outcomes in the course, information which the department is acting on to address concerns that emerge. The improvement from the pilot study to the first official assessment may be in part attributable to the larger sample size, but it also suggests that focusing attention on the problem areas may be producing the kinds of results one hopes for from an effective assessment process. The new plan is more specific and thorough than the plan included in the original course proposal. The committee recommends, however, that the presentation of information be restructured or added to in order to reflect the course’s role in the General Education Program. Since the course is part of that program, the specific categories of General Education objectives—area knowledge, skills, and attitudes and values--should be addressed more directly. The assessment plan is clearly providing data in those areas but needs to show how the information gathered ties in with the objectives of the GE program.

Writing 1320

The approach here has been in place for several years and is similar to that for WRTG 1310, except that 20% of papers were randomly selected and readers used a rubric that reflects the particular (and higher-level) objectives for 1320. Students performed adequately in all of the areas measured (see the attached table). The Writing Department is addressing areas in which student scores were “low adequate,” and is also considering minor changes to the rubric “to ensure clear language” and possibly to shorten it. The department is also considering ways of streamlining the process “to cut down on copy costs and paper waste” and to make it easier for faculty members to provide the sample papers that are needed.

Conclusions: Here again the department is to be commended for looking closely at assessment, but the committee recommends that the presentation of the data reflect the course’s role in the GE program more directly.