The UCA Core –
UCA's General Education Curriculum

Four-Year Summary Program Review (2016-2020)

Prepared by: Jacob M. Held, Ph.D.

Assistant Provost for Academic Assessment

and General Education

September 2020

Table of Contents

Prefatory

The following report was prepared by Dr. Jacob Held, Assistant Provost for Academic Assessment and General Education during the summer and early fall of 2020. This report is a summation of the first full cycle of assessment for the UCA Core. It is composed mostly of abbreviated results and recommendations from previous assessment reports from the past four years of assessment reporting for the UCA Core as well as comments and interpretations based on those four years of assessment. In addition, first year seminars (FYS) are addressed. As such, this report provides a comprehensive overview of the UCA Core over the period of the first complete four-year cycle of assessment (2016-2020).

The intention of this report is to provide the UCA Core Council and all relevant stakeholders of the general education program at UCA with a summary of the past four years, the first full assessment cycle of, the UCA Core. Such a summary is intended to provide valuable information to all vested in general education at UCA as the university continues to review its general education program.

Summary Findings

- *Student Learning Outcomes*

During the first, complete assessment cycle, assessment data indicates modest growth across the majority of student learning outcomes for the four competencies of the UCA Core. Growth is indicated by students scoring higher on outcome rubrics as they progress through the general education curriculum. For example, seniors should score higher on a rubric than first or second year students. Growth is expected as students progress through the curriculum, and attributing growth to any specific curricular intervention is problematic given the myriad factors that impact student learning and development.[1] However, growth across most learning outcomes under the four competency areas was present, which suggests that for those learning outcomes identified as fundamental to our general education curriculum our students develop greater competency as they matriculate through the Core curriculum at UCA. The data do provide valuable insights into where our students are in terms of expertise across the general education student learning outcomes. In addition, these data allow us to discern where students tend to do well, where they are not meeting expectations, and thus where in the curriculum to reinforce best practices or develop interventions where improvement is needed. In general, continued faculty development, as well as routine review of the Core curriculum, should provide many opportunities to facilitate greater student development across all student-learning outcomes. As the first complete cycle of assessment of the UCA Core, these data provide a benchmark against which to evaluate the data from the next complete cycle.

> "[O]ur students develop greater competency as they matriculate through the Core curricula at UCA…"

- *Process*

The process developed and implemented at UCA is sound. We aim to collect the population of artifacts for each competency area from which we derive a stratified, random sample. A team of trained faculty score these artifacts over the course of three days. Thus, in theory, a well-calibrated team with a high degree of interrater reliability generates these data. Data is processed and interpreted using AQUA and reported out to the university. Development opportunities are developed based on the assessment data. As designed, the process provides reliable, relevant data respective to student learning as well as informs developmental opportunities tailored to the

---

[1] Cf. Trudy W. Banta and Catherine A. Palomba, *Assessment Essentials: Planning, Implementing, and Improving Assessment in Higher Education*. (San Francisco, CA: Jossey Bass, 2015), p. 88.

Faculty Participation

"Good data can only be generated when faculty participate in the process by submitting artifacts, and when those artifacts are well-designed to align to the rubrics and provide scorers with a representative student performance. However, to date we have had dwindling faculty participation, routinely receiving artifacts from fewer than 50% of faculty who ought to be submitting artifacts."

assessment results. Where issues have persisted have been in the areas of faculty participation and compliance. Good data can only be generated when faculty participate in the process by submitting artifacts, and when those artifacts are well-designed to align to the rubrics and provide scorers with a representative student performance. However, to date we have had dwindling faculty participation, routinely receiving artifacts from fewer than 50% of faculty who ought to be submitting artifacts. In addition, faculty participation has been poor at pre-cycle training where assignment design and alignment is discussed. This has led to unscorable artifacts being included in the assessment process. Unfortunately, even those faculty that participate by submitting student work are not submitting well-designed artifacts. It is in the area of faculty participation where the system has faltered. Yet, none of the obstacles are insurmountable, nor do they invalidate the fundamental design of the assessment process. The process in place is well fitted to the structure of the UCA Core and the needs of the University in terms of assessment information related to the general education program.

- *Successes*

The first assessment cycle for the UCA Core has offered ample opportunities to learn what is needful in terms of assessing and improving the general education program and tailoring such efforts to the unique needs of UCA. Best practices and generalities only get one so far, and UCA's general education program needs to serve the needs of UCA students. Over the past four years we have learned a great deal about our program and how to tailor it to the needs of UCA. For example, recognizing that a crucial component of the assessment process is improvement, roughly two years into the first cycle we implemented a review process for the lower division Core wherein all courses under any one competency area are evaluated annually to discern if they are meeting the Core standards for lower division Core courses.[2] Courses are evaluated, and results are shared with departments. This process has led to continuous development and improvement of

---

[2] Core standards are articulated in the Core handbook. (https://uca.edu/core/for-faculty/) For lower division Core courses the requirement is: "Insofar as a course falls under one of these competencies and represents the corresponding goal, it should, considered as a whole, provide a foundational educational experience. This experience is provided through a majority of the course content being dedicated to the competencies indicated above, as well as a specific goal within that competency area and the affiliated outcomes of that goal."

the LD Core curriculum. Curricular review, in addition to faculty development, provides ample opportunity to keep the Core curriculum aligned to Core outcomes and dynamic in its offerings.

In addition, having recognized early on the deficiencies of the First Year Seminar program as defined by the initial taskforce and as implemented at the adoption of the UCA Core, we have worked diligently to improve the FYS program in an attempt to assure that first year students are getting a unique, valuable experience which both prepares them for success, while offering them a stimulating academic experience that connects them to UCA. In this regard, we now offer, in conjunction with the Center for Teaching Excellence, a recognition track, "Excellence in Teaching First Year Students," which offers faculty opportunities to engage in workshops and conversations with each other and area experts on best practices in educating and supporting first year students.[3] Early on Dr. Held also assembled a guidebook for First Year instructors which compiled exercises and information ready for integration in any FYS course. Keeping in line with the focus on supporting our transitional students, Dr. Held, with Dr. Thomas Bruick, developed an FYS Peer Mentor program. This program placed a sophomore student with previous experience in an FYS course in that course as a mentor to the first year students. The mentors took a class on student success, the last being taught by Dr. Bruick, and integrated what they learned in the FYS course they mentored. They would offer short informational sessions, and hold support or office hours for students. The initial data was promising, yet with no funding and meager support, the program was put on hiatus after two years. Revisiting this program should be a priority as we move forward with revisions to the FYS program.

Not only have we been able to develop and implement a functional assessment program for the general education program at UCA but we have offered myriad opportunities for faculty development. In addition, we have worked tirelessly to use what has been learned from the assessment process to continuously improve the general education program at UCA. The first four cycle of assessment offered a great deal of challenges. But these challenges were successfully met and led, ultimately, to a more robust general education program at UCA.

---

[3] For a recent iteration of the recognition track see: https://uca.edu/core/files/2016/04/Recognition-for-FYS-Achievement-Flyer-Fall-2017.pdf

I.   The UCA Core – An Overview

The UCA Core is a comprehensive academic program of study designed to develop and reinforce students' knowledge and skills of critical inquiry and effective communication, as well as the knowledge and skills necessary for living responsible, ethical lives in a diverse and changing world. The overarching goal of the program is to facilitate the development of thoughtful, knowledgeable, articulate, and ethical citizens.

The UCA Core is UCA's approach to providing a comprehensive, liberal education to all undergraduate students. It is designed to:

- Help students develop the knowledge and skills recognized as fundamental to a broad liberal education and necessary for success in a diverse and ever-changing world.
- Develop and build knowledge and skill areas across the curriculum from introductory, lower-division courses to junior and senior level, upper-division course work.
- Apply what the student has learned in a culminating, capstone experience.
- Complement the knowledge and skills particular to any field of study or career path.

The UCA Core is a cohesive course of study carried through the student's entire undergraduate career that builds core competencies around four knowledge and skill areas:

- Critical Inquiry – The ability to analyze new problems and situations to formulate informed opinions and conclusions.
- Effective Communication – The ability to develop and present ideas logically and effectively in order to enhance communication and collaboration with diverse individuals and groups.
- Responsible Living – The ability to address real-world problems and find ethical solutions for individuals and society.
- Diversity – The ability to analyze familiar cultural assumptions in the context of the world's diverse values, traditions, and belief systems as well as to analyze the major ideas, techniques, and processes that inform creative works within different cultural and historical contexts.

The UCA Core requires 38 credit hours at the lower-division (LD Core). These courses include the 35-credit-hour required state minimum core and one additional three-credit-hour course to satisfy the responsible living element in the UCA Core mission. The remaining 35 hours from the state minimum are distributed in the other knowledge and skills areas of critical inquiry, effective communication, and diversity.

Embedded within the lower-division is a first-year seminar (FYS). The first-year seminar comes from one of the lower-division academic courses. The purpose of the first-year seminar is to provide a small-class learning environment to facilitate engagement in academic study at the collegiate level, make a connection to the university, and reinforce the importance of communication skills.

At the upper-division (UD Core), additional courses within the four knowledge and skills areas [Critical Inquiry (I), Effective Communication (C), Diversity (D), and Responsible Living (R)] promote the development and application of knowledge and skills emphasized at the lower-division. In addition, a Capstone Experience (Z) provides a culminating, educational experience.

- *UCA Core Standards*

The Lower-Division (LD) Core at UCA is intended to provide a foundational education in the four core competencies: Effective Communication, Critical Inquiry, Diversity, and Responsible Living. Lower-division Core courses are defined by their role in knowledge and skill acquisition. In order to be foundational experiences, these courses must introduce and develop key concepts and skills in the four competency areas. A course in the lower-division Core, as foundational, is the primary course in which a Core competency is introduced and corresponding skills introduced and developed. The focus of the course should be primarily the development of a Core competency, irrespective of course content. Courses in the LD Core assess in order to validate that they are an optimal educational experience, but these courses are placed within the LD Core due to their content, not by the simple fact that they assess for a particular competency. In order to provide a foundational experience, these courses must be essentially designed around this competency and with an eye on the specific goal under which they are designated and the learning outcomes affiliated with that goal.

It is the UCA Core Council's responsibility to adjudicate proposed as well as extant courses in relation to their commitment to offer these foundational experiences. The question before the UCA Core Council is not whether a particular course will assess for a specific goal or set of student learning outcomes, but whether the course in question provides, in essence and when considered as a whole, an introduction to, and opportunity to develop through repeated exposure, the knowledge and skills indicated by the learning outcomes under the competency and goal under which the course is proposed to be designated.

As the UCA Core Council considers proposals to add a course to the LD Core, considerations will include: 1) Does the majority of course content in the proposed course explicitly address the outcomes of the competency and corresponding goal under which the course would be designated; 2) does the course curriculum, as a whole, address the Core competency in question. Provision of a course syllabus is crucial in determining context; 3) Is the assignment or assignments designated as assessing for the learning outcomes of the competency and goal indicated well designed. Will it adequately capture student performance in these areas?

Insofar as a course falls under one of these competencies and represents the corresponding goal, it should, considered as a whole, provide a foundational educational experience. This experience is provided through a majority of the course content being dedicated to the competencies indicated above, as well as a specific goal within that competency area and the affiliated outcomes of that goal. In order to be a truly developmental experience a student's exposure to these skills must be prolonged, intensive, and repeated.

First Year Seminars are defined by their placement in the LD Core. FYS courses are to be introductions to the university experience providing a seminar style, intensive educational experience as well as opportunities to connect to UCA. First-Year Seminar courses provide a highly interactive, small-class learning environment for first-year students. Students work together in small groups to develop skills in teamwork and written communication as well as knowledge in one other UCA Core area (Diversity, Critical Inquiry, or Responsible Living) as it applies to the subject matter of the course. Students also learn about the importance of general education and its place at UCA. In addition, these courses offer support for the unique needs of first-year students.

The Upper-Division (UD) Core at UCA reinforces and applies those skills introduced and developed at the lower division. Upper-Division Core courses are an opportunity to apply the skills introduced and developed at the lower-division and demonstrate mastery. The UCA Core is not connected to any individual major or minor program, and if programs wish to offer a full complement of UD Core courses for their majors or minors they are welcome, so long as they respect the integrity of the UCA Core program, and so long as those courses exemplify the UCA Core's values. However, should a program decide, or otherwise be unable, to provide a full complement of UD Core courses within a major program, it is the responsibility of that program to develop an academic map or program of study that integrates UD Core courses from outside of that program in a pedagogically sound and efficient way to afford students an efficient path to graduation.

The UD Core culminates in a Capstone Experience (Z) that integrates effective communication and critical inquiry alongside one's chosen field of study. Capstones are defined by their placement in the UCA Core. Capstones are designed to be a culminating experience in the major, affording the student an opportunity to demonstrate her abilities in effective communication and critical inquiry, alongside her disciplinary knowledge. Capstones are opportunities for students to engage in an integrative educational experience drawing from their comprehensive education. As such these courses should be intentionally placed at the end of a student's program of study and provide an opportunity to demonstrate mastery of disciplinary knowledge as well as the Core competencies otherwise indicated.

- *Breadth Requirements*

In order for UCA's Core to be consistent with Arkansas's state minimum core requirements, students must meet certain "breadth" requirements. At UCA this means that as students complete

The goal of the UCA Core is to provide a common, foundational educational experience to all UCA undergraduate students. The UCA Core achieves this by providing a coherent educational program oriented around four Core competencies scaffolded throughout the student's undergraduate career at UCA.

the LD Core they must meet the state requirements including the required 3 credits designated Fine Arts (FA), 3 credits designated Humanities (HUM) and 6 credits of Social Science (SS).

Social sciences (SS) are defined as a branch of science that deals with the institutions and functioning of human society and with the interpersonal relationships of individuals as members of society, or a science (as anthropology or social psychology) dealing with a particular phase or aspect of human society. Here, we should be diligent to make sure that students in completing their social science requirements are being afforded exemplary, paradigmatic experiences in the social sciences. This is equally true for the Fine Arts (FA) and Humanities (HUM).

The Fine Arts encompass the creative arts, especially visual arts (painting, drawing), plastic arts (sculpture), and performance arts (dance, theater, music) whose products are appreciated for their aesthetic and intellectual content. Study in the arts is essential to a liberal education. The arts are a part of the cultural heritage of every citizen, and often an opportunity to be exposed to diverse cultures and ways of life. We must emphasize that the arts cannot be learned through random exposure any more than math or science can. Thus, Fine Arts courses need to be selected as exemplars of this type of focused engagement with the creative endeavors of humankind.

The Humanities are defined as the study of how people process and document the human experience. Since humans have been able, we have used philosophy, literature, religion, history, and language to understand and engage the world. These modes of expression, now academic disciplines, have become some of the subjects that traditionally fall within the penumbra of the Humanities. These topics are fundamental to developing an appreciation for our place in the world, and shape how we understand ourselves and interact within our communities and the world at large. In order to provide a foundational experience within the Humanities a student must participate in a sustained

engagement with a particular area, and be provided the tools to apply what has been learned to their own experiences, community, and the broader world. This cannot be achieved in passing or with random exposure, but must be the result of dedicated, focused, academic engagement within a singular discipline or focus of study.

- *Summary Statement*

The goal of the UCA Core is to provide a common, foundational educational experience to all UCA undergraduate students. The UCA Core achieves this by providing a coherent educational program oriented around four Core competencies scaffolded throughout the student's undergraduate career at UCA. This objective can only be achieved if the UCA Core Council continuously evaluates the UCA Core curriculum and assesses it for programmatic cohesion and effectiveness. It is imperative that the UCA Core Council continuously monitor and evaluate the UCA Core to assure that students are receiving the best possible educational experience that UCA can offer.

Assessment

In Spring of 2017, the UCA Core Council approved a new approach to assessing the UCA Core.[4]

Assessment of the UCA Core proceeds on a 4 year cycle. Each year a single competency, with all its associated goals, is assessed. Once a full cycle is complete, an assessment of the UCA Core program as a whole, as well as its assessment plan will be possible. The first four-year cycle provides initial data. A second four-cycle allows for an assessment of the process as a whole. A full programmatic assessment is recommended every 10 years.

- *Methods and Measures*

All faculty scheduled for UCA Core assessment are surveyed via Google Form. The form asks faculty to indicate the assignment(s)/artifact(s) used for assessment purposes, its place within the course curriculum, as well as the relevant context of the artifact(s). Faculty development sessions are offered the semester before collection to assist them in both understanding the process itself as well as how to best design a student artifact to align to the Core rubric under which their courses assess. The Office of Assessment collects all student artifacts and uploads them into AQUA.

The Office of Assessment subsequently recruits a scoring team for each outcome from those instructors who teach UCA Core classes within that respective outcome and who submitted artifacts for assessment. The scoring teams are assembled in the summer following the academic

---

[4] The assessment plan can be located at: https://uca.edu/core/for-faculty/ under "Resources"

year during which artifacts were collected. The scoring team in normed and proceeds to score student artifacts from the stratified, random sample assembled by the Office of Assessment within AQUA.

- *Data Collection and Review*

Data collected via the scoring teams is input into AQUA. The data is accessible by the Office of Assessment who provides a summary brief to the UCA Core Council every fall. The Assistant Provost for Academic Assessment and General Education reviews the data and provides an interpretation to relevant stakeholders as well as publishing an annual report. In addition, results are shared in campus forums and via the UCA Core website annually. Colleges and Departments are able to request tailored reports on an as needed basis.

- *Data Analysis*

When considering the analysis of assessment data in higher education one must attend to the simple facts that learning is not an easily quantifiable attribute, that data collected is not amenable to standard statistical analysis since the variables measured are not interval or ratio variables, but ordinal, and that the educational environment is not amenable to conditions necessary for model integrity or statistical rigor. As one scholar notes, "We have no good reason to believe that all attributes are quantifiable."[5] With respect to quantifying student learning, a standard rubric that measures outcomes across three or four competency levels cannot be analyzed as if the interval between a one and two is identical to that between a two and three or three and four. Rather, the numbers, instead of indicating equidistant levels of learning, are indicative of rank. That is, a four is higher than a three, which is higher than a two, but we are not sure, nor can we be sure or quantify, how much they differ, nor do they differ by the same amount.[6] Therefore, data analysis should focus on frequency data as opposed to means and standard deviations, and should be taken with a proverbial grain of salt. In addition, assessment in higher education can fail to meet minimal standards of statistical rigor due to the fact that one cannot control for all reasonable factors that predict an outcome, nor can one, for ethical reasons, withhold interventions necessary to isolate factors and predict an effect. Assessment in higher education is thus rife with insuperable difficulties inherent to the practice that necessitate that interpretations account for the problematic nature of attempting to measure student learning in an environment that forecloses the possibility of statistical rigor.

The Office of Assessment analyzes the data collected in AQUA, focusing primarily on frequency data and student learning across level (class year) looking for marked improvement across time

---

[5] Joel Michell, *Measurement in Psychology: Critical History of a Methodological Concept* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), p. 19.

[6] Cf. Michell, *Measurement in Psychology*, Chapter 1 – Numerical Data and the meaning of *measurement*

for each learning outcome assessed. Results are shared with the UCA Core Council and findings disseminated to the faculty at large. Detailed analyses based on demographic factors such as Pell eligibility, gender, race, college, department, etc. are conducted routinely within the Office of Assessment and available upon request.

- *Program Improvement*

The Office of Assessment has, in the past, worked with the Center for Teaching Excellence (CTE) to facilitate programming aimed at developing improvement measures relevant to a particular competency and goal. Actions have included roundtable workshops, seminars, assignment design assistance, etc.

In practice, Dr. Held, the Assistant Provost for Academic Assessment and General Education, has identified best practices in any particular area by reviewing assessment data. Dr. Held then enlists faculty who have demonstrated exemplary educational practices across these outcomes and facilitates faculty workshops with these top performing faculty. Faculty who teach in the area are invited to attend.

In addition, after the initial assessment of a competency area, the UCA Core Council, by means of the Assessment sub-committee reviews all courses under that competency in the lower division Core. Courses are evaluated by Core handbook standards, similar to the usual curriculum review process. Courses found deficient in alignment or rigor in addressing the Core competency and goal under which they fall are asked to provide an assurance argument in which they indicate revisions they will take in order to better align to Core outcomes.[7] In addition, all materials used in pre-cycle faculty development related to any particular outcome are provided on the UCA Core website.[8]

---

[7] All reports and results of the Assessment Committee's review process can be located at: https://uca.edu/core/minutes/

[8] Training and development materials can be located under the "Assessment" tab, organized by Core competency at: https://uca.edu/core/for-faculty/

Curriculum

The UCA Core curriculum is guided by the UCA Core Council. The Council is charged to review the current UCA Core program and make appropriate recommendations to the Council of Deans; to review and recommend to the Council of Deans new and revised UCA Core curricula proposed by the various departments and colleges; and to initiate and recommend policies and procedures relevant to UCA Core requirements. Given that the UCA Core Council oversees the UCA Core curriculum it is incumbent on the UCA Core Council to: 1) articulate a clear vision of the UCA Core as a cohesive program of study; 2) determine and apply rigorous standards for all courses included in the UCA Core curriculum consistent with the goals of the UCA Core; 3) oversee assessment of the program to guarantee that the goals of the UCA Core are met by the Core curriculum.

The Core Council is comprised of:

- One department chair is elected from each of the academic colleges.
- Two faculty members elected from each academic college with at least one holding the rank of assistant professor or above;
- One faculty member elected by the University College faculty.
- One faculty member elected by the Schedler Honors College faculty.
- Two students are invited to serve as members of the council, one representing the Student Government Association and one representing Alpha Chi.
- The Assistant Provost for Academic Assessment and General Education serves as chair of the Council.
- The associate provost as designated by the provost, university director of assessment, director of the library and the registrar are ex-officio, non-voting members.

Each council member serves three years on a rotating basis. Students serve one-year terms. The council elects its secretary each academic year.

As part of its regular duties, the UCA Core Council reviews all proposals to add courses to or remove courses from the UCA Core Curriculum. Proposals are reviewed based on course content and fitness, as well as with respect to UCA Core curricular needs. It is the UCA Core Council's responsibility to evaluate proposed as well as extant courses in relation to their commitment to offer experiences consistent with purpose and mission of the UCA Core.

Liberal education has always been understood as a set of outcomes desirous for a well-rounded and developed human being. In modern times these outcomes have been defined and defended under the argument that they foment the development of students into functioning citizens of character. From the trivium and quadrivium to today this has been true, regardless of whether how these outcomes were manifest or delivered have changed.[9] Having clearly articulated

---

[9] Cf. Derek Sherman, "A Trivium-Based Heuristic: Reemphasizing Listening in the General Education Curriculum," The Journal of General Education (Volume 66, Nos. 3-4, 2017) passim. For an lengthier and more comprehensive study see Bruce A. Kimball, *Orators and Philosophers: A History of the Idea of Liberal Education* (New York: College Entrance Examination Board, 1995)

outcomes, as does the UCA Core, alleviates the difficulty of explaining the content, and thus justifying the relevance of, UCA's general education program. Having clearly articulated outcomes also affords UCA to both assess the program and promote and reinforce curricular coherence. In addition, since the curriculum is governed by the Core Council, a representative body of all UCA faculty, it is the faculty, through their representatives that monitor, assess, revise, and deliver the general education curriculum at UCA. This is a crucial component to UCA's general education program. As one scholar notes, "…how curricula are developed and how educators execute these courses matter."[10] Having faculty involved in the development, provision, assessment, evaluation, and revision of the general education curriculum is crucial to its coherence, rigor, and ultimately its success. The fact that at UCA we regularly convene to discuss the aims of our general education program and the structure of our curriculum, as well as the fact that we focus on outcomes and use this information to inform curricular design brings UCA in line with best practices in terms of the development and delivery of our general education program.[11]

"HOW CURRICULA ARE DEVELOPED AND HOW EDUCATORS EXECUTE THESE COURSES MATTER."

Sherman, 197

Ultimately, the UCA Core, as a curriculum, is developed and implemented using what might be termed a Federalist Model. With strong university standards articulated in the UCA Core handbook, and courses approved into the curriculum via a representative legislative body, it is up to the individual departments to offer these courses in line with university standards, and in this regard they have a great deal of latitude. When courses are reviewed for consistency and rigor according to the Core standards each course is adjudicated by a sub-committee of the Core Council according to these standards. Thus, there is oversight assuring consistency and quality, while recognizing the autonomy of instructors, departments, and colleges in terms of how the general education program is delivered within their respective areas. This is a collaborative effort and thus requires participation from all involved as well as a shared understanding and appreciation of shared expectations and values.

---

[10] Sherman, "A Trivium-Based Heuristic," 197.

[11] See David Schejbal, "General Education Reconsidered," *The Journal of General Education* (Volume 66, Nos. 3-4, 2017) passim.

II.   Assessment Summaries

The following report summaries are comprised of both abridged and revised versions of the annual reports generated by the Office of Assessment, as well as updated recommendations.[12]

The academic year of 2016-17 marked the first year of assessment of UCA's general education program. Previous to the adoption of the UCA Core (2013), general education at UCA had not been intentionally designed around articulated student learning outcomes, nor had it been systematically assessed. Prior to AY 2016-17, there had been one previous attempt to collect assessment data for the UCA Core, but it was a cumbersome and laborious process of dubious value.[13] This previous method required all faculty to fill out assessment rubrics for all of their students depending on the area under which their courses assessed, submit those data as individual excel spreadsheets to the Office of the Provost where these data would be collected, collated, aggregated, and ultimately, interpreted. The problems with this process were numerous. Calibration or interrater reliability was close to nil. Training was offered by Dr. Held, then Director of the UCA Core, both in person and on-line via Blackboard. However, these learning modules were sparsely used. In addition, blanket scoring occurred in several instances. In these cases, a faculty member would give all of her students the same score. Given these factors, these data were unreliable. In addition, the vast amount of data meant that it was over a year before a report was generated, and then offered mean scores, which given the nature of assessment in learning, as noted above, is an unreliable way to understand student learning across the population. Thus, this previous method of assessment, although well-intentioned and ambitious, was designed for failure. Thankfully, those involved learned from this effort and developed a viable, meaningful assessment process for the UCA Core.

With the hiring of Dr. Brandon Combs as Director of Assessment, UCA had needed expertise in assessment, and with consultation of Dr. Held, then Director of the UCA Core, a new assessment process was adopted.[14] This process allowed the university to focus on one competency area per year, as well as improvement measures, thus allowing focus and the potential to close the loop effectively each cycle. In addition, with the addition of trained scorers the calibration problem was solved while

THIS NEW METHODOLOGY SET US UP FOR SUCCESS FOR THE LONG TERM.

alleviating the workload of faculty. Thus, this new method was both statistically sound, providing reliable data in a usable format to inform continuous improvement, while being less cumbersome on the faculty thus generating less resistance from an already reticent community. This new methodology set us up for success for the long term.

- *Responsible Living (2016-17)*

In spring of 2017, the Office of Assessment collected artifacts from faculty for the evaluation of the UCA Core Responsible Living Core competency. Faculty who taught in this area during the 2016-2017 academic year completed a survey that provided their course syllabus, assignment

---

[12] Full, annual assessment reports can be located at https://uca.edu/core/assessment/
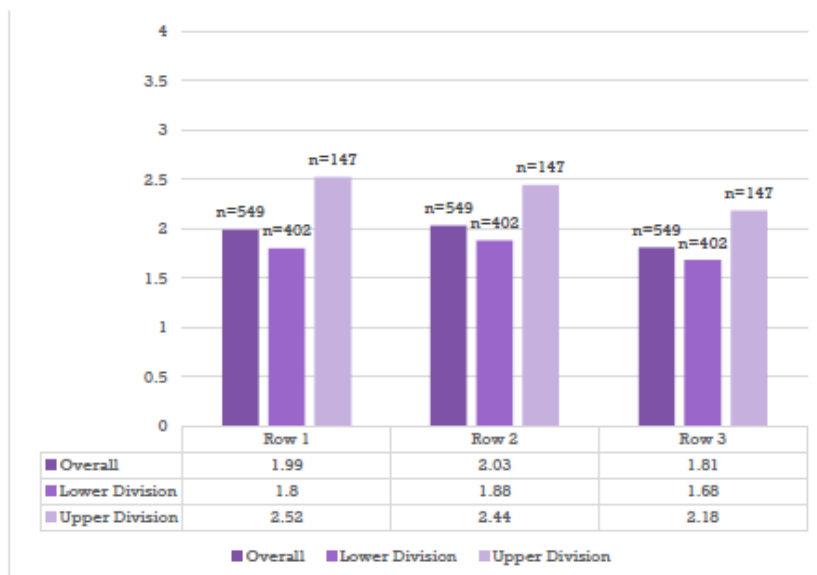[13] See: https://uca.edu/core/files/2020/09/Assessment-of-the-UCA-Core-Fall-2015.pdf
[14] This is the process described under the "Assessment" sub-section of section I. The UCA Core above. See page 12.

instructions, and indicated how their student artifacts would be provided to the Office of Assessment.

For the 2016-2017 academic year, 2,501 student artifacts were collected. The population included both fall and spring, however given the late adoption of the new assessment process collection did not occur until spring of 2017. Therefore, faculty participation for the fall semester was optional. The artifacts for spring 2017 accounted for a **77.25%** participation rate.

Overall, 51% of the total artifacts submitted were scored, including 75.31% of Rubric A and 41.82% of Rubric B. Throughout the evaluation process interrater reliability was monitored to ensure reliability of the evaluations being completed. There was a 42% joint probability of agreement with a 0.734 bias and 0.85 limit of agreement. In other words, 42% of the evaluations that were scored by two evaluators had identical scores, and, overall, the evaluators scored less than one point apart.
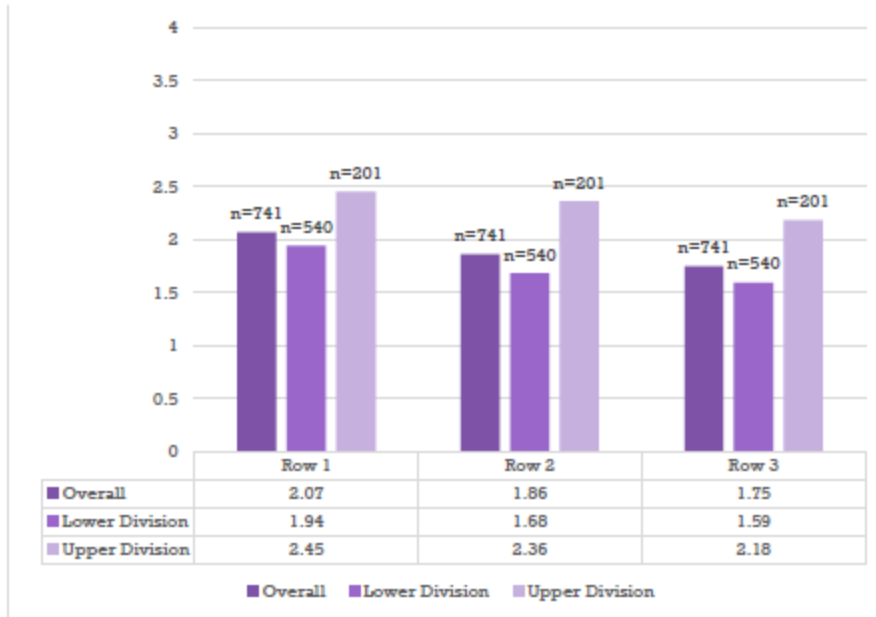
Rubric A: Overall

	Row 1	Row 2	Row 3
Overall	1.99	2.03	1.81
Lower Division	1.8	1.88	1.68
Upper Division	2.52	2.44	2.18

Rubric A: Overall Standard Deviations

	Row 1	Row 2	Row 3
Overall	0.87	0.82	0.79
Lower Division	0.74	0.76	0.71
Upper Division	0.97	0.82	0.86

Overall, the scores for Rubric A averaged toward the middle of the potential scores. For Rubric A, there was a noticeable difference between lower and upper division courses. Lower division courses scored in an expected range, however the upper division scores were lower than expected (e.g., lower division scores should be between 1 and 2, and upper division scores should be between 3 and 4).

Rubric B: Overall

	Row 1	Row 2	Row 3
■ Overall	2.07	1.86	1.75
■ Lower Division	1.94	1.68	1.59
■ Upper Division	2.45	2.36	2.18

■ Overall   ■ Lower Division   ■ Upper Division

Rubric B: Overall Standard Deviations

	Row 1	Row 2	Row 3
Overall	0.83	0.82	0.84
Lower Division	0.75	0.70	0.73
Upper Division	0.92	0.91	0.96

Overall, the scores for Rubric B averaged toward the middle of the potential scores. For Rubric B, there was a noticeable difference between lower and upper division courses. Lower division courses scored in an expected range, however the upper division scores were lower than expected (e.g., lower division scores should be between 1 and 2, and upper division scores should be between 3 and 4).

The 2016-2017 implementation of the UCA Core assessment plan was a scaled-down model of the full process. Considering the reduced size of the project, the process demonstrated a strong ability to provide reliable data that is both calibrated and generalizable. The final results of the 2016-2017 UCA Core assessment process opened the door for conversations in many areas. The considerations and recommendations as presented to the UCA Core Council by the Office of Assessment, included:

> 1. Scores did not advance based on student classification as expected (e.g., lower division scores should be between 1 and 2, and upper division scores should be between 3 and 4). This inconsistency can potentially be linked back to assignment design.
>> a. Recommendation: Explore assignment design training for UCA Core faculty.
>> b. Recommendation: Explore curriculum scaffolding of the UCA Core.
> 2. There were several artifacts marked as "N/A" by evaluators for not meeting one or more rows of the rubrics. For Rubric A, Row 1 had 25, Row 2 had 29, and Row 3 had 43 "N/A" scores. Rubric B had 40 "N/A" scores in Row 1.

Improvement at UCA

"…faculty at UCA share best practices for our students with faculty who share the same student body. Often we look to "best practices" and fail to notice that our students are a unique group of individuals with unique needs and one size does not fit all. Looking to those faculty who have delivered for our students helps us improve the learning experience for our actual population of students as opposed to simply blindly following national trends or fads in higher education."

a. Recommendation: Work with faculty to ensure the assignment being chosen is the best representation of skill achievement for their assigned rubric.
3. Participation for Spring 2017 was 77.25%. For a first-time implementation, this is an excellent response rate, however it could brought up in future semesters.
a. Recommendation: Continue to work with faculty and department chairs to ensure all course sections are submitting for UCA Core assessment.

Although the new process was developed to solve problems of unreliable data, problems persist. Even though we have solved the calibration problem, namely that of interrater reliability, as well as could be expected in assessment of this nature, the team can only score the artifacts it is given. Poor quality artifacts, whether they be poorly aligned to Core rubrics or poorly designed in general, present an obstacle to generating reliable data reflective of actual student performance. Thus, we need faculty to submit artifacts in order for them to be scored, and we need artifacts that provide ample opportunity for students to demonstrate learning across the outcomes of the Core rubrics. Feedback from the score teams corroborates this conclusion. In their feedback to the Office of Assessment, scorers frequently indicated poorly aligned artifacts.

Regardless, the value of assessment in higher education stems from the conversations that the process invites. Faculty and administration are discussing learning outcomes, student learning, general education, and faculty's role in delivering our students a shared, universal curriculum. This is a welcome change in culture surrounding general education at UCA. The data are reasonably reliable providing us trend data in terms of student learning across their entire career at UCA.

Efforts are made regularly to improve the process. In order to improve assignment design and alignment, pre-cycle workshops are offered where faculty can discuss assignments and the Core rubrics. In addition, improvement measures have been put in place as a result of the process. Such efforts include post-cycle workshops wherein top performers are identified using the data and invited to offer workshops on best practices within those competency areas. Thus, faculty

at UCA share best practices for our students with faculty who share the same student body. Often we look to "best practices" and fail to notice that our students are a unique group of individuals with unique needs and one size does not fit all. Looking to those faculty who have delivered for our students helps us improve the learning experience for our actual population of students as opposed to simply blindly following national trends or fads in higher education.

In addition, beginning in AY 18-19 lower division Core courses are now routinely reviewed against Core standards as articulated in the UCA Core handbook to assure compliance and alignment with the learning outcomes of the competency area under which they fall. This process began with responsible living.[15] This process invites greater conversation among faculty, increases buy-in, and assures that students are receiving a consistent engagement with Core outcomes regardless of which course in the LD Core they take. The general education program is thereby able to provide a truly universal education to our students, not a haphazard menu style general education curriculum.

Finally, this first year of assessment provided a window onto the Core curriculum and indicated ways in which to develop it. Most notably, the Director of the UCA Core in consultation with the Director of Assessment authored a Handbook for the UCA Core that outlines all processes and principles that govern the Core, as well as a fully articulated assessment plan.[16]

In sum, this first year of assessment was a great success given from where we started and where we were able to progress in a relatively short amount of time. What was developed and implemented through the partnership of Drs. Combs and Held was a sea change in general education assessment and improvement at UCA.

---

[15] Information including which courses were evaluated, the results of the evaluations, as well as all reports of the Core Council's Assessment sub-committee can be located under the "Responsible Living Assessment Report and Findings" link at https://uca.edu/core/for-faculty/responsible-living-assessment/
[16] The handbook and assessment plan can be located under "Resources" at: https://uca.edu/core/for-faculty/

- *Diversity (2017-2018)*

The Office of Assessment and the Director of the UCA Core were better able to prepare for the assessment cycle for AY 2017-18. First, a previous cycle for responsible living had been completed offering experience in implementing the process at UCA. In addition, the Director of Assessment, having been present on campus for some time was more familiar with the actors involved and thus better situated to facilitate assessment of the Core program. Finally, having raised faculty awareness through the previous cycle it was expected that faculty participation would be improved. This was also the first assessment cycle in which it was possible to offer pre-cycle training for faculty. Sessions covered rubric interpretation, assignment design and alignment, as well as the process of artifact submission. Thus, the diversity cycle offered the first, genuine, full assessment cycle.

Through the 2017-2018 academic year the Office of Assessment collected artifacts from faculty for the evaluation of the UCA Core Diversity learning outcome. Faculty who taught in this outcome during the 2017-2018 academic year completed a survey that provided their course syllabus, assignment instructions, and how the artifacts would be provided to the Office of Assessment.

For the 2017-2018 academic year, there were 4,008 student artifacts submitted. The population included fall, spring, and summer. The artifacts for 2017-2018 accounted for a 40.54**%** participation rate as calculated by student headcount, and a 67.53% participation rate as calculated by faculty participation by course section. Participation rate was lower than the previous year, and following years have continued a disturbing trend of decreased participation.
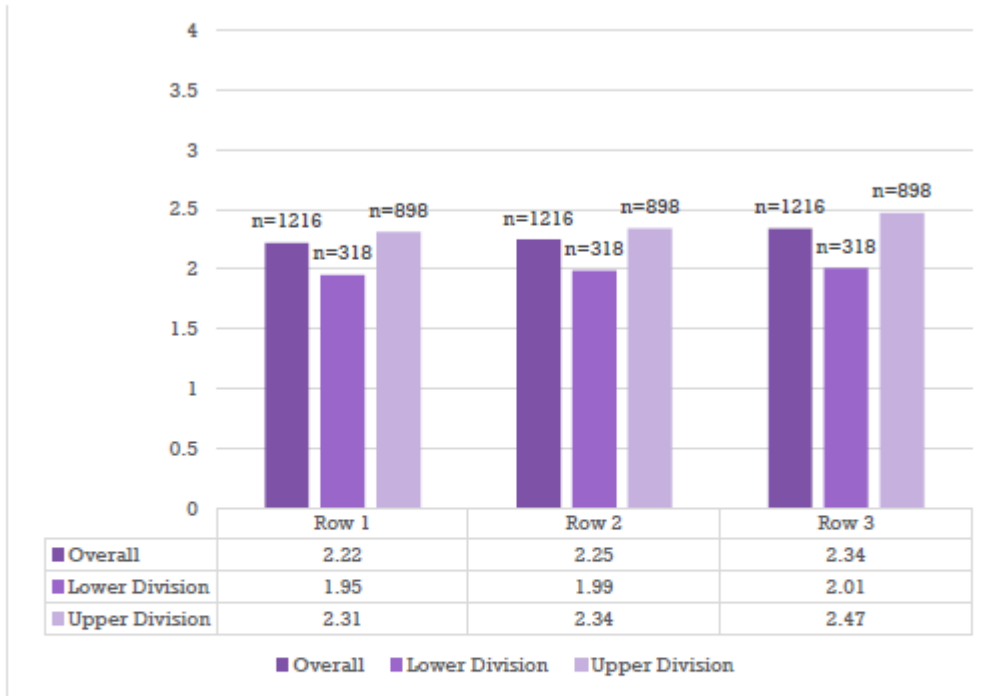
Overall, 87% of the total artifacts submitted were scored, including 85.57% of Rubric A, 81.53% of Rubric B, and 96.59% of Rubric C. The original team consisted of three Rubric A evaluators, three Rubric B evaluators, and four Rubric C evaluators because of the sample distribution.

Throughout the evaluation process, interrater reliability was monitored to ensure reliability of the evaluations being completed. There was a 39.06% joint probability of agreement with a 0.737 bias. In other words, 39.06% of the evaluations that were scored by two evaluators had identical scores, and, overall, the evaluators scored less than one point apart.

Faculty Participation

The artifacts for 2017-2018 accounted for a 40.54**%** participation rate as calculated by student headcount, and a 67.53% participation rate as calculated by faculty participation by course section. Participation rate was lower than the previous year, and following years have continued a disturbing trend of decreased faculty participation.
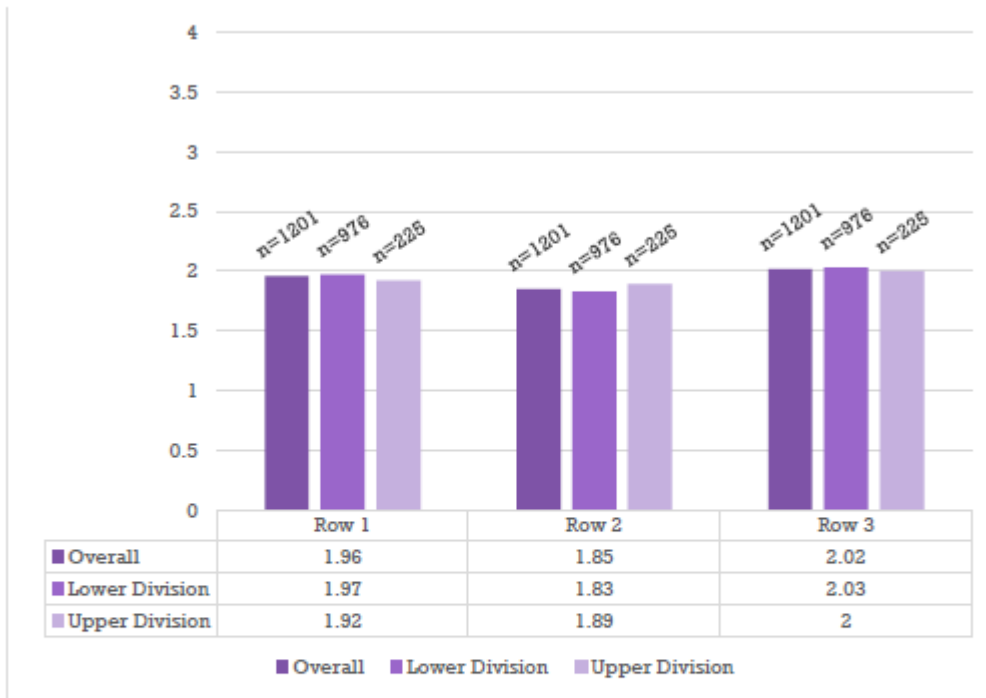
Rubric A: Overall

	Row 1	Row 2	Row 3
■ Overall	2.22	2.25	2.34
■ Lower Division	1.95	1.99	2.01
■ Upper Division	2.31	2.34	2.47

■ Overall   ■ Lower Division   ■ Upper Division

Rubric A: Overall Standard Deviations

	Row 1	Row 2	Row 3
Overall	0.92	0.92	0.89
Lower Division	0.89	0.95	0.87
Upper Division	0.92	0.89	0.86

Overall, the scores for Rubric A averaged toward the middle of the potential scores. For Rubric A, there was a noticeable difference between lower and upper division courses. Lower division courses scored in an expected range, however the upper division scores were lower than expected (e.g., lower division scores should be between 1 and 2, and upper division scores should be between 3 and 4).
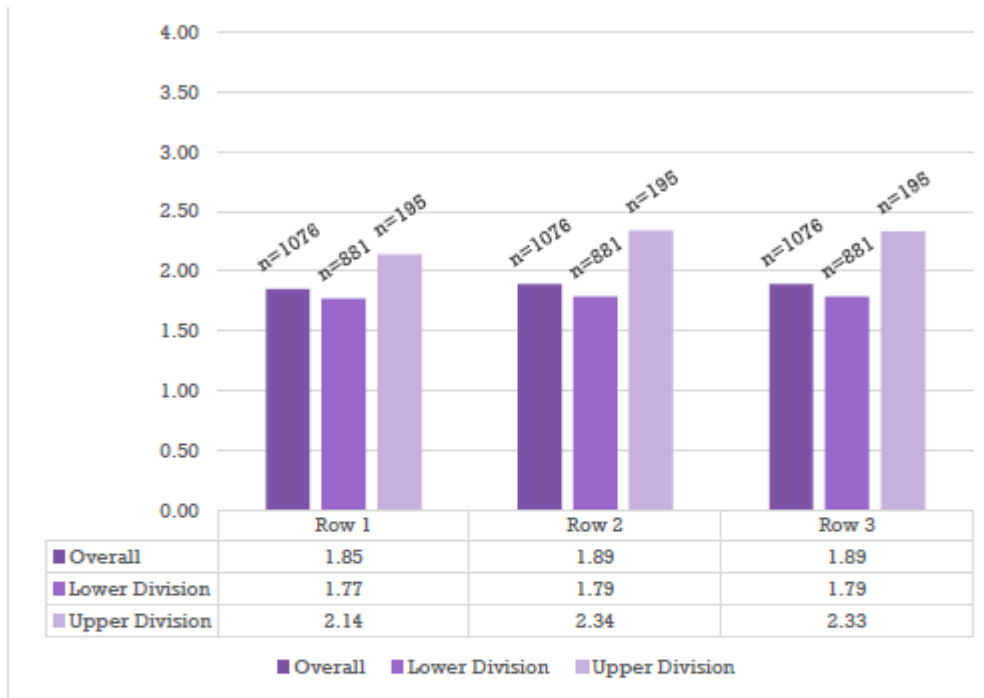
Rubric B: Overall

	Row 1	Row 2	Row 3
Overall	1.96	1.85	2.02
Lower Division	1.97	1.83	2.03
Upper Division	1.92	1.89	2

Overall   Lower Division   Upper Division

Rubric B: Overall Standard Deviations

	Row 1	Row 2	Row 3
Overall	0.70	0.77	0.73
Lower Division	0.65	0.73	0.66
Upper Division	0.85	0.91	0.94

Overall, the scores for Rubric B averaged toward the middle of the potential scores. For Rubric B, there was not a noticeable difference between lower and upper division courses. Lower division courses scored in an expected range, however the upper division scores were lower than expected (e.g., lower division scores should be between 1 and 2, and upper division scores should be between 3 and 4).

Rubric C: Overall

	Row 1	Row 2	Row 3
Overall	1.85	1.89	1.89
Lower Division	1.77	1.79	1.79
Upper Division	2.14	2.34	2.33

Rubric C: Overall Standard Deviations

	Row 1	Row 2	Row 3
Overall	0.87	0.91	0.93
Lower Division	0.83	0.88	0.90
Upper Division	0.93	0.91	0.94

Overall, the scores for Rubric C averaged toward the middle of the potential scores. For Rubric C, there was a noticeable difference between lower and upper division courses. Lower division courses scored in an expected range, however the upper division scores were lower than expected (e.g., lower division scores should be between 1 and 2, and upper division scores should be between 3 and 4).

The final results of the 2017-2018 UCA Core assessment process opened the door for conversations in many areas. The considerations and recommendations as presented to the UCA Core Council by the Office of Assessment were similar to those offered the previous year:

1. Explore curriculum scaffolding of the UCA Core.

Key Takeaways

"…the Diversity cycle presented several takeaways…faculty participation is crucial, yet lacking. Faculty need to be well-informed about general education assessment, curricular expectations, assessment rubrics, and good assignment design... Sessions were offered to do so but were poorly attended. *Without faculty participation* in these regards, *assessment will be of limited value* as *data will be unreliable.*

2. There were several artifacts marked as "N/A" by evaluators; recommendation: Work with faculty to ensure the assignment being chosen is the best representation of skill achievement for their assigned rubric.

Again, scorer feedback reiterated the problem with artifacts being poorly aligned to the learning outcomes of the Diversity rubrics. A common observation was that the student artifact simply failed to address the outcome entirely, with the assignment failing to prompt the student to offer a performance that would demonstrate capability along that outcome.

3. Participation for 2017-2018 dropped from 77% to 41%. This is a significant decline in participation as calculated by student head count. As calculated by faculty member headcount, the participation rate is 68%, which means the faculty members who did not participate included several large course sections. Recommendation: Continue to work with faculty and department chairs to ensure all course sections are submitting for UCA Core assessment.

As with the previous year, following the assessment of the Diversity competency area, improvement sessions were scheduled. These included post-cycle workshops where top performers were identified and invited to offer workshops on best practices within those competency areas. In addition, the conclusion of the Diversity cycle also instigated a new improvement measure. The Core Council in continuously reviewing proposals to add courses the UCA Core decided to implement a review process wherein all courses currently in the UCA Core as a result of the expedited review process would be reevaluated to determine if they were well aligned to the competency area under which they were placed, with a focus being placed on the lower division Core. The Core Council thus charged the assessment sub-committee with reviewing all lower division Core courses and evaluating whether they were well aligned, according to the standards articulated in the Core Handbook. During the review process, each course is evaluated and adjudged by the assessment sub-committee. The process began with the responsible living competency area, as the first in the assessment cycle. Thus, improvement measures now included review of lower division core courses for alignment, as well as faculty improvement

sessions related to specific outcomes.[17] The Core Council was thus annually reviewing the general education curriculum as well as offering faculty improvement opportunities. With diversity, issues that manifested in the review process seemed to center on the definition of diversity itself. Often courses might include a token "diverse" author or authors but fail to engage substantively with diverse viewpoints. Courses might also be rife with works from individuals from demographically diverse backgrounds but ideologically be monolithic, thus providing the appearance of diversity while promoting a singular perspective. Thus, the assessment sub-committee adopted an interpretation of the Diversity rubric that stressed epistemic humility in course approaches to material and content as well as approaches that promoted viewpoint diversity, not simply the inclusion of authors or scholars from demographically diverse backgrounds.[18] This approach focused on the value behind educating students towards diversity, namely, an appreciation for varied perspectives and approaches in scholarship and was consistent with the diversity rubrics in use.

> "This approach focused on the value behind educating students towards diversity, namely, an appreciation for varied perspectives and approaches in scholarship ..."

In summary, the Diversity cycle presented several takeaways. First, faculty participation is crucial, yet lacking. Faculty need to be well-informed about general education assessment, curricular expectations, assessment rubrics, and good assignment design. Sessions were offered to do so but were poorly attended. Without faculty participation in these regards, assessment will be of limited value as data will be unreliable. However, developing buy-in is part of the responsibility of the Office of Assessment, thus greater effort must be made in both communicating the value of general education assessment as well as getting data back to stakeholders so they can see that assessment efforts are relevant to instructional duties and mission. The latter issue has only recently begun to be remedied as Dr. Held has become more familiar with the capacities of the AQUA assessment suite and is able to disseminate disaggregated assessment data to departments and colleges. However, this work must continue in order to develop a better appreciation for general education assessment at UCA and thus develop greater cooperation between faculty and the Office of Assessment.

---

[17] Information including which courses were evaluated, the results of the evaluations, as well as all reports of the Core Council's Assessment sub-committee, which conducts these reviews can be located under the "Diversity Assessment Report and Findings" link at https://uca.edu/core/for-faculty/diversity-assessment/

[18] For a discussion of this issue see: Greg Lukianoff and Jonathan Haidt, *The Coddling of the American Mind: How Good Intentions and Bad Ideas are Setting up a Generation for Failure*, esp. Chapter 13

Excursus

In between the Diversity and Effective Communication assessment cycles UCA lost its Director of Assessment when Dr. Brandon Combs left UCA to pursue other career opportunities. Although this was a significant disruption in terms of assessment measures at UCA, it did provide opportunities to review current processes and redevelop them. Thus, the loss of Dr. Combs was an opportunity to review assessment processes at UCA, including general education assessment.

The challenges faced resulting from the loss of Dr. Combs, and the ways in which they were addressed, will be noted when relevant below. However, it should be emphasized that Dr. Jonathan Glenn, Dr. Jacob Held, and Mrs. Alyson McEntire deserve a great deal of credit for continuing assessment operations during this transitional time.

- *Effective Communication (2018-2019)*

Effective Communication was assessed during AY 2018-19. This competency area faced unique challenges, as discussed below, but the procedure was similar as had been used in previous years. The semester prior to the academic year scheduled for assessment training sessions were offered for all faculty scheduled to teach a course in the Effective Communication area during AY 18-19. Multiple sessions were scheduled for each rubric area, with times being scattered throughout the week to offer several opportunities for faculty to attend. Overall, attendance at these sessions was poor.

After pre-assessment training, the Office of Assessment prepared to collect student artifacts during AY 18-19. The Effective Communication competency area posed unique challenges in this regard. Whereas Rubric B (Written) allowed for submission of traditional artifacts, such as papers, essays, exams…Rubric A (Oral) required the collection of student presentations in the form of speeches or other forms of oral presentations. After consultation with area experts, it was determined that the best process would be to record student presentations in their usual classroom environment by means of portable cameras and upload these video artifacts into AQUA.

Rubric C, Collaboration, also posed a unique challenge since the rubric was designed to be administered by students to students as a peer assessment of student performance in collaborative learning. The Office of Assessment was aware that calibration would be a problem and the results dubious. This was borne out as indicated below.

During AY 18-19, the Office of Assessment attempted to collect artifacts from all courses designated under the Effective Communication Core competency which includes all Lower and Upper division courses so designated as well as first-year seminar and capstone courses. Faculty teaching these courses were identified through ARGOS. All identified faculty were contacted multiple times by means of email. They were provided with a link to a google form. The form asked for information regarding what artifact would be chosen, when it would be administered to students, and when and how it would be delivered to the Office of Assessment.

Fall 2018: **36.54%** response rate
Spring 2019: **30.63%** response rate
AY 2018-2019: **37.87%** total response rate to the Effective Communication assessment survey

The response rate was disappointing,[19] and raises several issues for assessment of the UCA Core. Since we had a significantly low rate of response to the survey, and it is reasonable to assume actual collected artifacts would be a sub-set of the survey responses since not all that completed a survey did

---

[19] Survey Response Rate: Fall 2018: 36.54% response rate to the survey (203 contacted, 74 responded); Spring 2019: 30.63% response rate to the survey (222 contacted, 68 responded); AY 2018-2019: 37.87% total response rate to the Effective Communication assessment survey (272 contacted, 103 responded).

submitted artifacts, nor were all artifacts received usable for assessment purposes due to various factors, the resultant assessment data is problematic. However, we still did review all the collected material and provided an analysis, keeping in mind the problematic nature of the data.
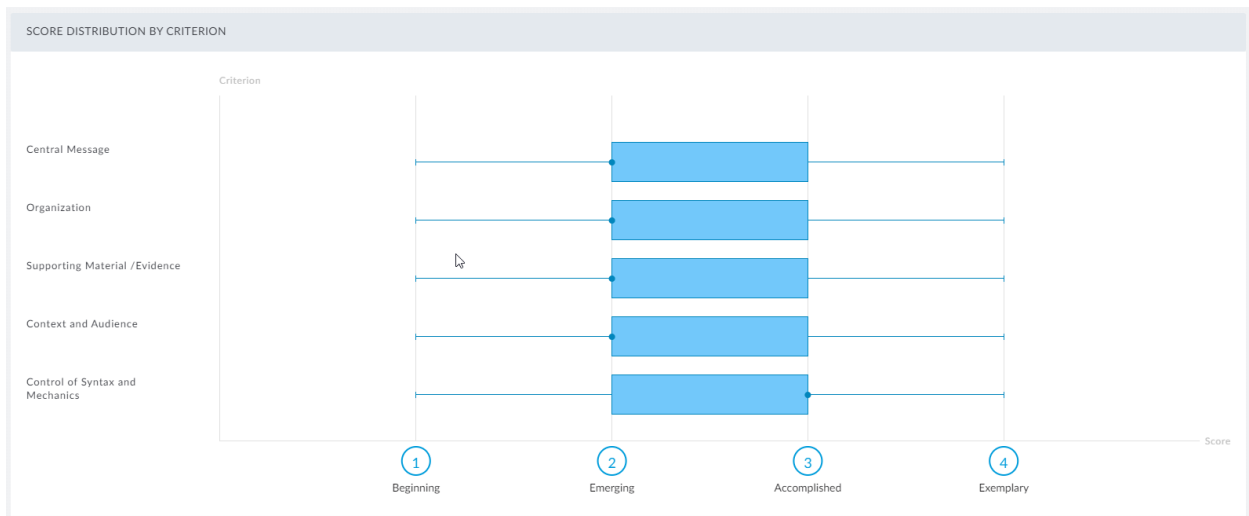
- *Rubric A (Oral)*

Rubric A posed a unique challenge insofar as it was difficult to collect student work. In order to collect student artifacts the Office of Assessment had to record student presentations. Although we had the assistance of student workers we were understaffed so collecting the population of student artifacts in this area was not feasible. Thus, we collected a stratified, random sample based on survey responses.
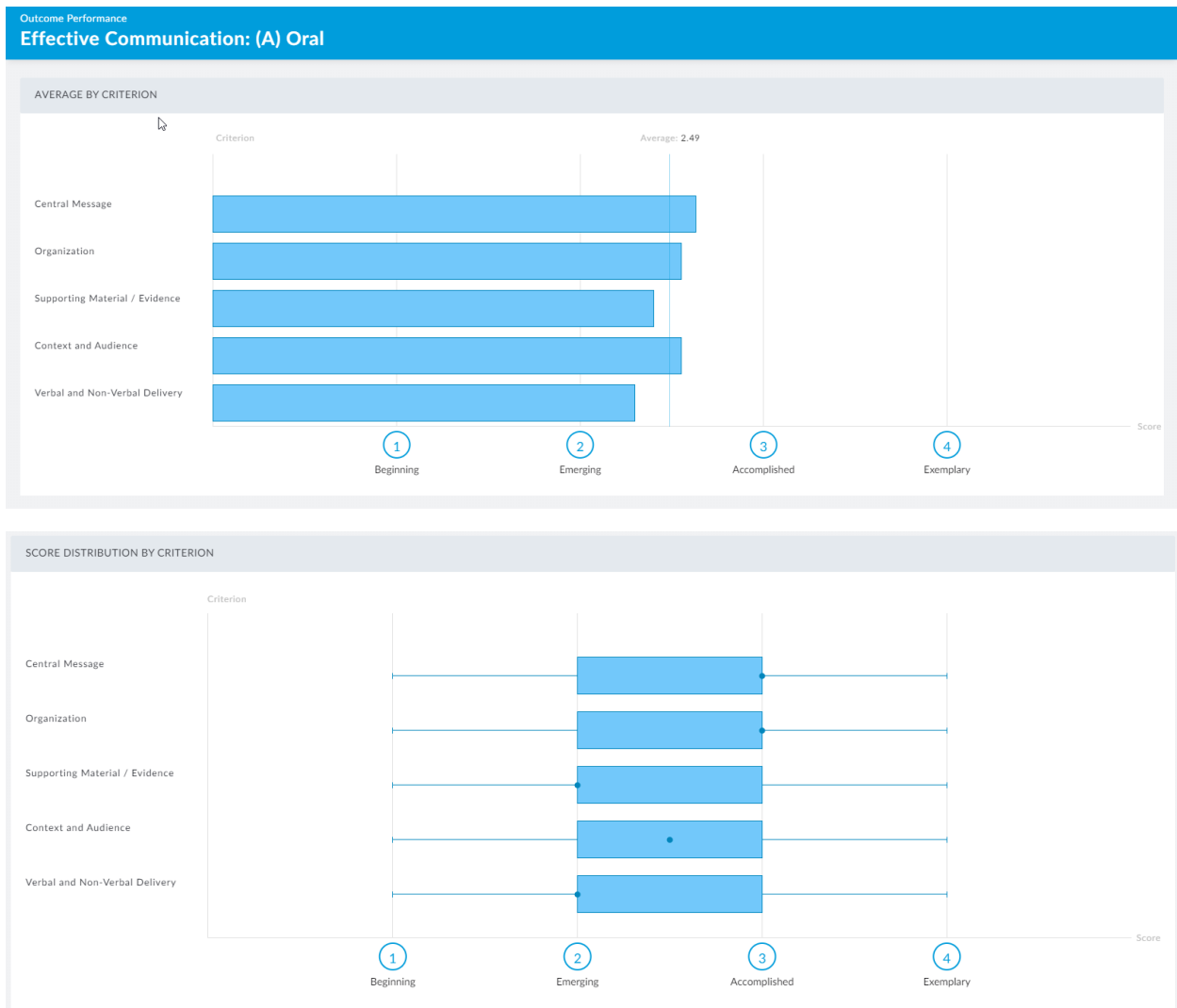
The overall data does indicate that across the five SLOs included under Rubric A, "Supporting Material and Evidence" and "Verbal and Non-Verbal Delivery" are areas where there is most room for development.

- *Rubric B (Written)*

AVERAGE BY CRITERION

Criterion   Average: **2.39**

- Central Message
- Organization
- Supporting Material /Evidence
- Context and Audience
- Control of Syntax and Mechanics

Score

1 Beginning   2 Emerging   3 Accomplished   4 Exemplary

SCORE DISTRIBUTION BY CRITERION

Criterion

- Central Message
- Organization
- Supporting Material /Evidence
- Context and Audience
- Control of Syntax and Mechanics

Score

1 Beginning   2 Emerging   3 Accomplished   4 Exemplary

From the data, we note that the strongest area of performance for lower division students is the Control of Syntax and Mechanics outcome. The lowest performing SLO is Supporting Material/Evidence.

The data would suggest that it is in the use of supporting material and evidence, as well as context and audience, where the scores are fair but progress only slightly. Given the nature of SLO 4 as effectively a measure of rhetorical skill, this lack of development might help explain the common complaint about students' lack of writing ability. Students seem to fail to know how

Focus on Rhetoric

"…although written communication is a foundation to a liberal/general education, and although our students possess mechanical ability, they lack rhetorical skills such as evidentiary use and sensitivity to audience. In order to reinforce these skills, an emphasis on rhetoric…might be valuable."

to use evidence adeptly, and do not articulate their positions forcefully and with nuance given audience and context. Thus, although written communication is a foundation to a liberal/general education, and although our students possess mechanical ability, they lack rhetorical skills such as evidentiary use and sensitivity to audience. In order to reinforce these skills, an emphasis on rhetoric, as opposed to the mechanics and structure of writing might be valuable,

- *Rubric C (Collaboration)*
This rubric was designed to be applied by students to peers. This is both intuitive and flawed. It is intuitive insofar as if you want to evaluate a student on their performance in a group, the only individuals with intimate knowledge of those performances would be other members of the group. It is flawed insofar as the reliability of scores will be irreparably suspect insofar as it would be impracticable to calibrate all students on the rubric to assure that interrater reliability was within an acceptable level. Thus, this process is fundamentally flawed when it comes to collecting reliable data on student performance across these outcomes. The data bear out this evaluation. The overall average on this rubric was a 3.68, with median scores at both the LD and UD levels of assessment being a 4, the top most score. Students, thus, scored their classmates remarkably high suggesting several possible hypotheses. First, students filled out the rubric to be the best of their ability and indicated a stellar performance by everyone. This interpretation would be indicative that students weren't critical in their discernment since, it is unreasonable to presume that everyone is excellent. Second, the consistent high scores might indicate a lack of interest in completing the rubric thus scoring all members a 4 out of ease. Third, students may have scored their classmates as exceptional out of courtesy motivated by empathy or a misunderstanding that this score impacted student grades, thus a 4 indicates a charitable disposition on the part of the scorer more than the competence of the student being scored. Regardless, the scores, and the method by which they were obtained, indicate a fundamental flaw in assessing these outcomes by the method adopted.

Given the results and the hypotheses proffered, it is recommended with respect to Rubric C of Effective Communication that, although collaboration is a laudable learning outcome, one that ought to be pursued, and a valuable skill to be inculcated in students at UCA, assessing this outcome in the manner currently in use cease. The collection of completed rubrics is a cumbersome process, it requires effort on the part of students, faculty, and staff, and the results are uninformative.

"…students are lacking skills in, and would probably benefit from, a classical education in rhetoric as well as specific direction in terms of disciplinary conventions at the upper division."

Overall, what can reasonably be gleaned from the results of Rubric A and B, is that our students perform well on the mechanical components of writing and presenting, but lack competency in rhetorical art. Insofar as this is demonstrated by a lack of growth, greater focus should be placed at the upper division in educating students about disciplinary conventions and best practices. Although the trope "My students can't write," is common among faculty, they can write in the sense that they can perform the tasks necessary for technically accurate use of language. Where they are lacking is in the realm of stylistic nuance and performance in regards to audience and context as well as delivery and the proper use of evidence. What this indicates is that students are lacking skills in, and would probably benefit from, a classical education in rhetoric as well as specific direction in terms of disciplinary conventions at the upper division.

- *Critical Inquiry (2019-2020)[20]*

The semester prior to the academic year scheduled for assessment training sessions were offered for all faculty scheduled to be teaching a course in the Critical Inquiry area during AY 19-20. Multiple sessions were scheduled for each rubric area, with times being scattered throughout the week to offer several opportunities for faculty to attend. Overall, attendance at these sessions was sparse. Poor attendance at these information sessions translates into greater confusion during the academic year during which assessment takes place. Faculty are unprepared to participate leading to greater work on behalf of assessment staff. In addition, poor attendance means poor preparation, thus the artifacts that are received are often poorly designed to register student performance across the learning outcomes the rubrics were designed to measure. Poorly aligned artifacts is a common issue reported by the scoring team when assessing student work.

During spring 2020, the pre-cycle training for responsible living (2020-2021) was conducted on-line in webinar format, recorded, and posted online, as a result of Covid-19. Attendance at these webinars was significantly higher than previous pre-cycle trainings, and having the materials posted and accessible is also an added benefit to faculty who may wish to review it at a more convenient time.

During AY 19-20, the Office of Assessment attempted to collect artifacts from all courses designated under the Critical Inquiry Core competency including all Lower and Upper division courses so designated as well as capstone courses. Faculty teaching these courses were identified through ARGOS. All identified faculty were contacted multiple times by means of email. Faculty were provided with a link to a google form. The form asked for information regarding what artifact would be chosen, when it would be administered to students, and when and how it would be delivered to the Office of Assessment.

Survey Response Rate:

	# of unique instructors teaching courses	# of unique instructors responding to survey	% response rate
Fall 2019	258	96	**37.21**
Spring 2020	254	102	**40.16**
Total AY 19-20	310	144	**46.45**

Survey Yield rate = **80.74%**

Survey yield rate was calculated by comparing the total number of surveys received against the number of "assignments" created in AQUA, where an "assignment" is a unique course indicated by CRN. Presuming one survey per course per instructor a 100% yield rate would indicate that

---

[20] The original, full report can be located at https://uca.edu/core/assessment/, under the heading "Reports."

we received usable artifacts for every course a respondent instructor taught. Less than 100% indicates that there were instructors who responded who did not subsequently turn in student artifacts for their course, or the artifacts returned were not usable.

The response rate was an improvement over the AY 18-19 response rate but still sub-optimal. A poor response rate raises several issues for assessment. Since we had a low rate of response, the resultant assessment data is problematic.

Evaluation of the artifacts took place between August 10-19th, 2020. The evaluation team was recruited from faculty who had participated in the assessment process, participation including teaching a course in the designated area as well as having completed a survey and submitted artifacts.

The score teams spend the first half of their first day together engaged in norming exercises. The team reviews the rubric and proceeds to evaluate anchor assignments. After each assignment is evaluated, the team discusses the results and then proceeds to the next assignment. By the close of the calibration exercise, the teams expressed a shared understanding of the rubric and shared expectations. Teams also conferred regularly during scoring to continuously re-calibrate.

Percent Agreement and Interrater Reliability

|	% agreement	% disagree at 1 pt.[21]	Weighted Kappa[22]	Reliability[23]
Goal A	53.52	86.87	.253	Fair
Goal B	52.93	89.80	.262	Fair
Goal C	71.50	82.04	.623	Substantial

Using a more standard measure of inter-rater reliability for ordinal values, Weighted Kappa, we find "fair" reliability in the teams scoring goals A and B, and "substantial" reliability in the team for goal C. The high measure of reliability in goal C may be attributable to the nature of the rubric and artifacts, that is, mathematical/quantitative artifacts that are more standardized across courses and disciplines than the artifacts provided for goals A and B. Regardless, reliability among the teams was good; the data should therefore reflect accurately the relative student performance on the rubric.

---

[21] When scorers did disagree, this is the percent of disagreements between a single level, for example, scorer A = 1, scorer B = 2, or scorer A = 3 and scorer B = 4.
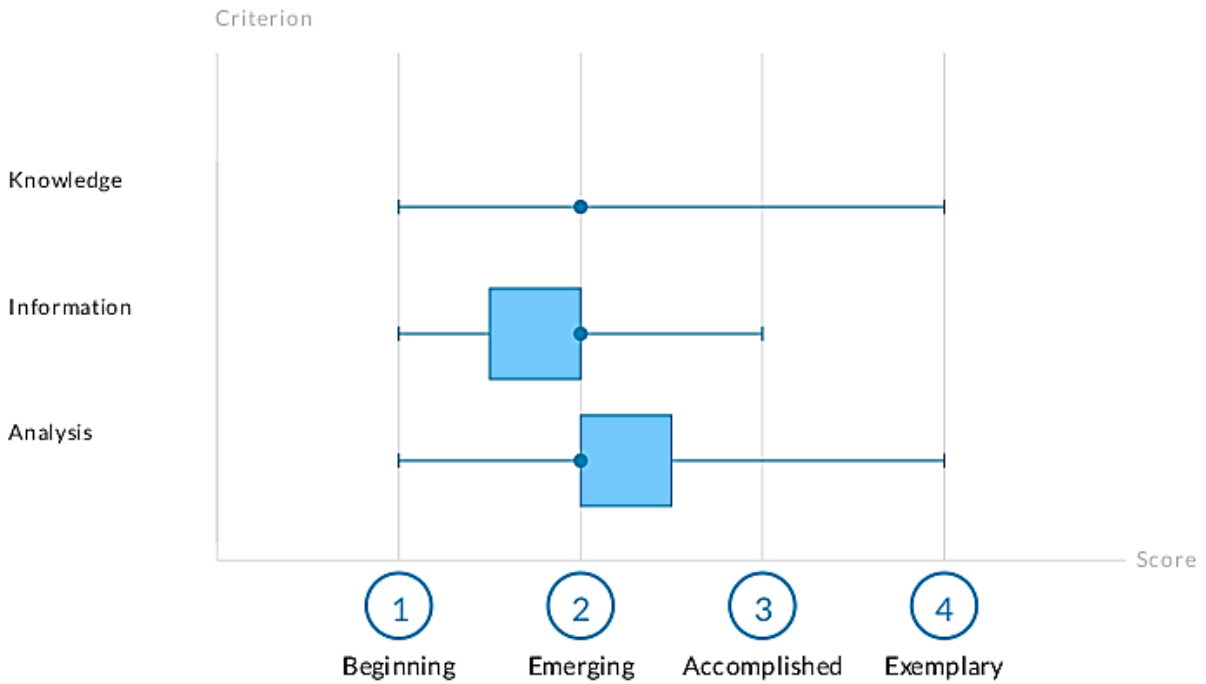
[22] Weighted Kappa used given the nature of the data as ordinal variables rated by two different evaluators. Calculated using SPSS.

[23] Based on Landis JR, Koch GG. The measurement of observer agreement for categorical data, *Biometrics* (1977); 33:159-74.
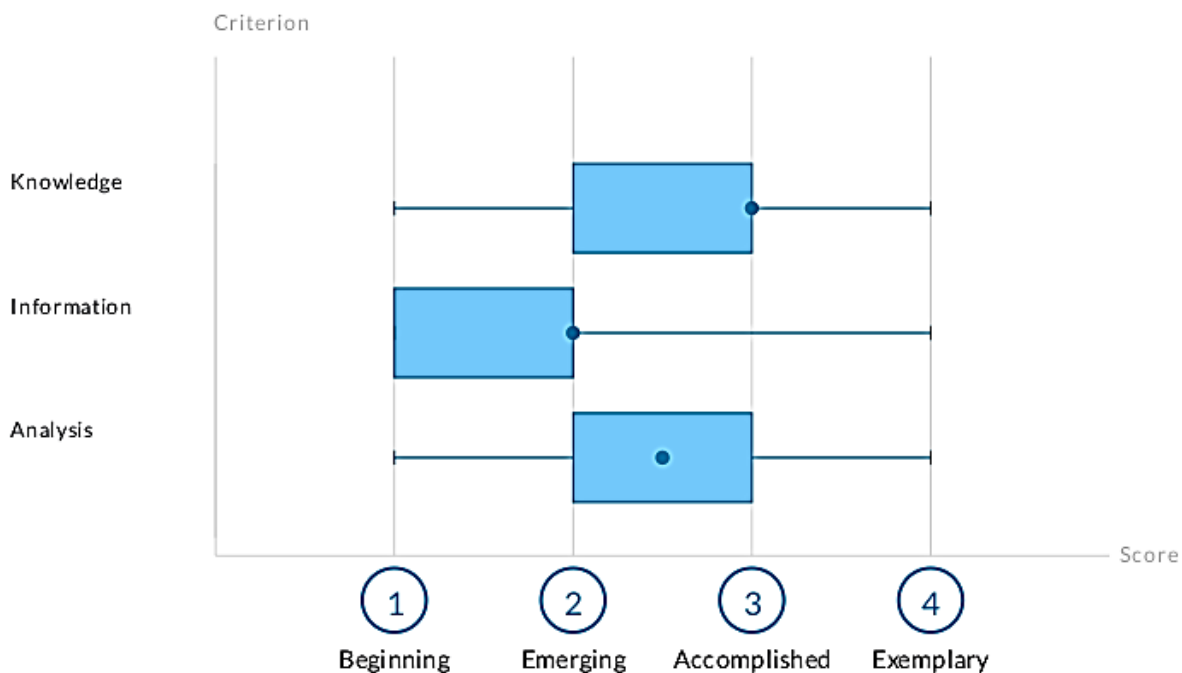
Goal A : Overall Score Distribution by Outcome
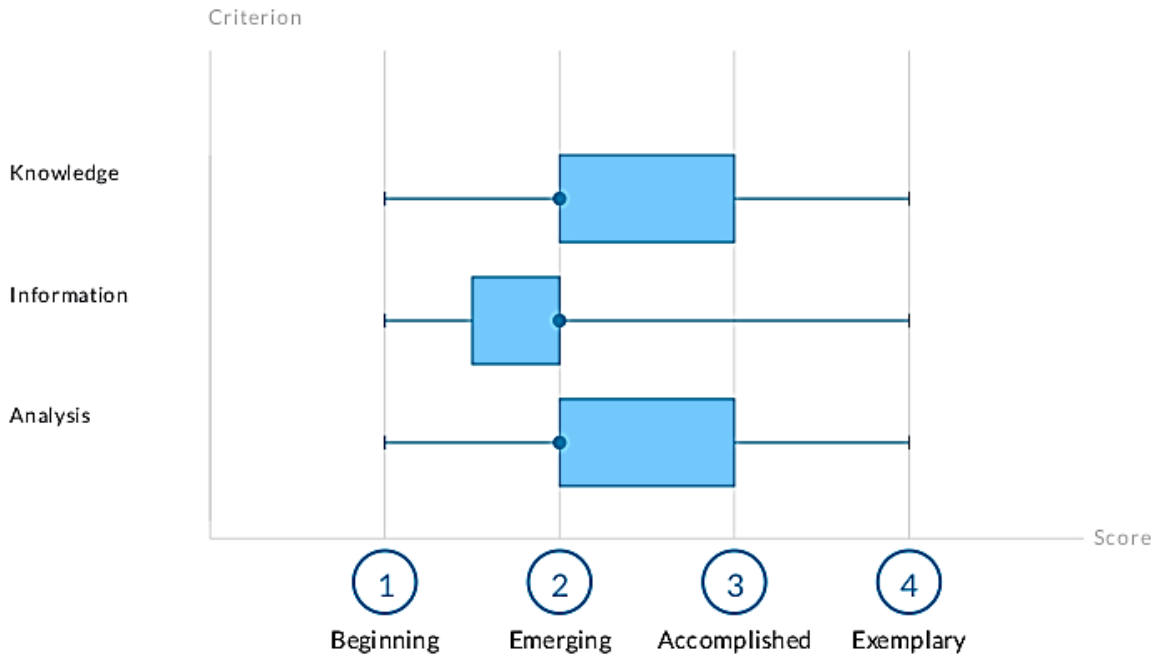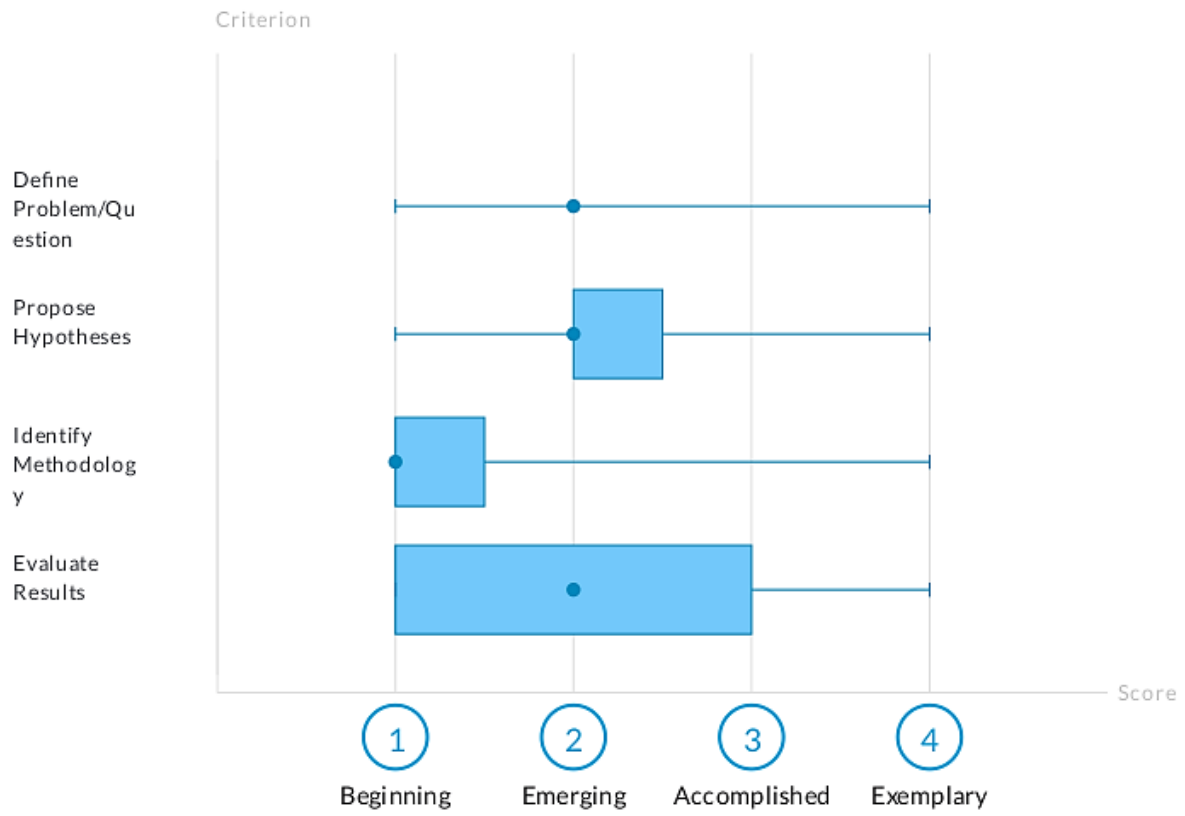

Lower Division by Outcome

Upper Division by Outcome

Criterion

In general, the data presents trends to be expected. The median score across all outcomes overall was 2, and the median score increased across all outcomes, save information, from the lower division to the upper division demonstrating an increase in frequency of proficient scores as students progressed through the curriculum. The only anomaly is the conspicuous lack of any scores of 4 (exemplary) in the Information outcome. However, considering the outcome itself and discussions of the score team, the lack of scores of 4 is not surprising. The Goal A rubric defines a score of 4 under "Information" as: "Selects information from the most relevant and credible sources, without critical omissions of key sources." As the score team observed, unless a faculty scorer were well acquainted with the discipline from which the artifact was generated, and the specific area within that discipline that the artifact addressed, adjudging "most relevant," "credible," and whether "critical omissions" occurred is impossible to discern. Thus, a lack of scores of 4, is indicative of limitations inherent in the scoring process, not necessarily indicative of student competence.

Goal B presents a disappointing low in UCA Core assessment. The response rate was significantly poor. In addition, we received usable artifacts for only one upper division course, thus making assessing growth impossible. The response to Goal B, and the resulting data is the worst case scenario when faculty do not participate in the process. We have data that cannot reliably inform us about our student performance across the curriculum. Below, only the overall scores are presented since a lower/upper division Core comparison is impossible, and even lower division scores cannot be reasonably generalized due to the selective nature of artifacts collected.
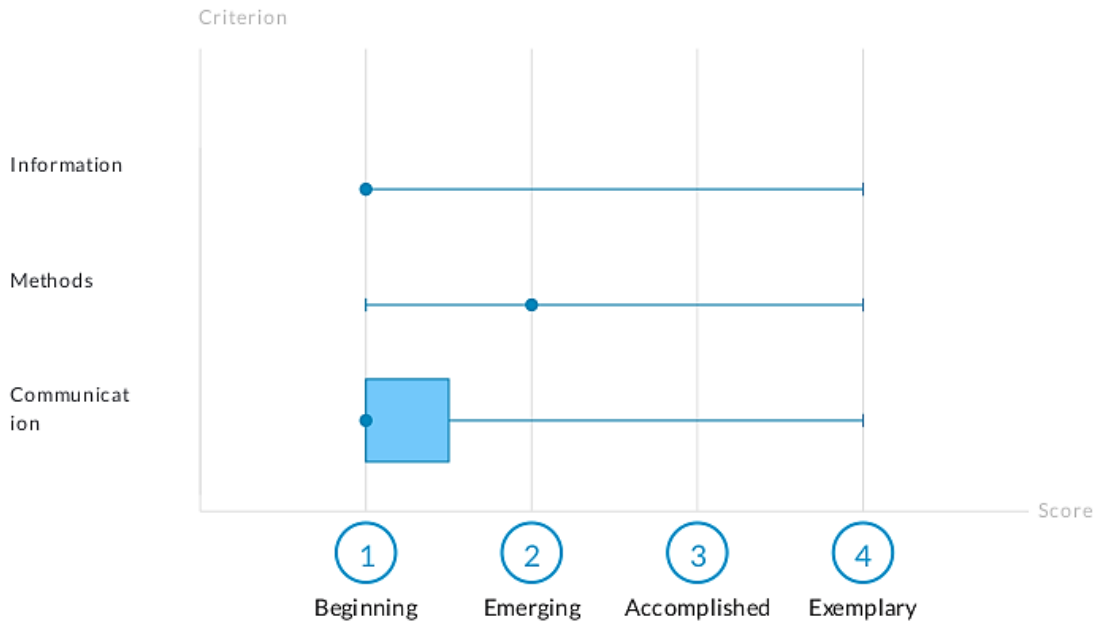
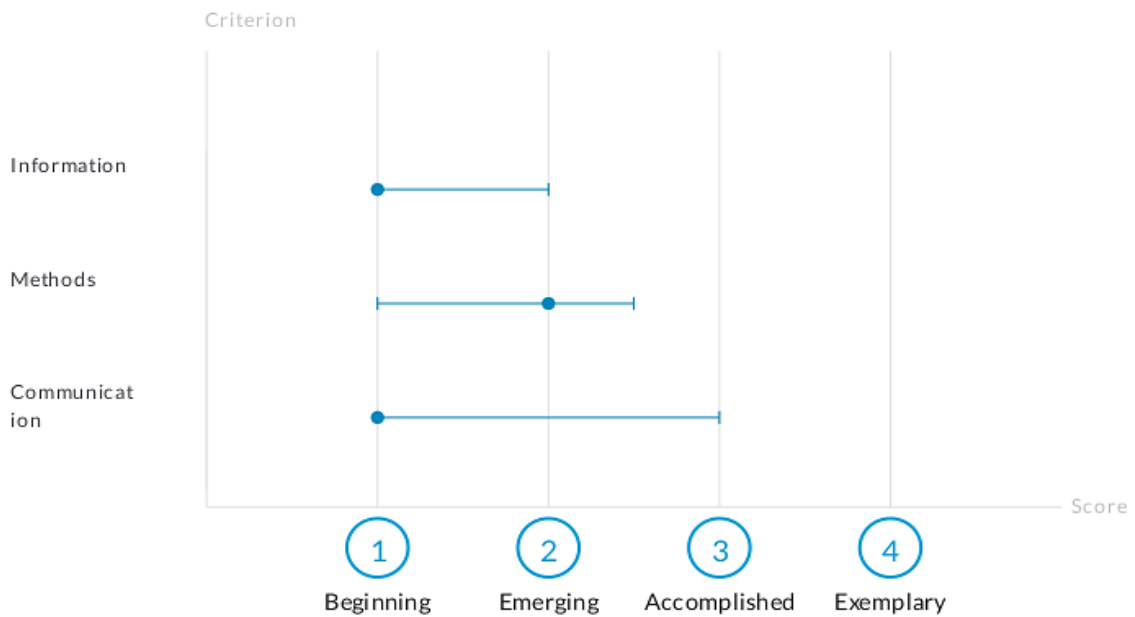Overall Score Distribution by Outcome

Goal C

Overall Score Distribution by Outcome
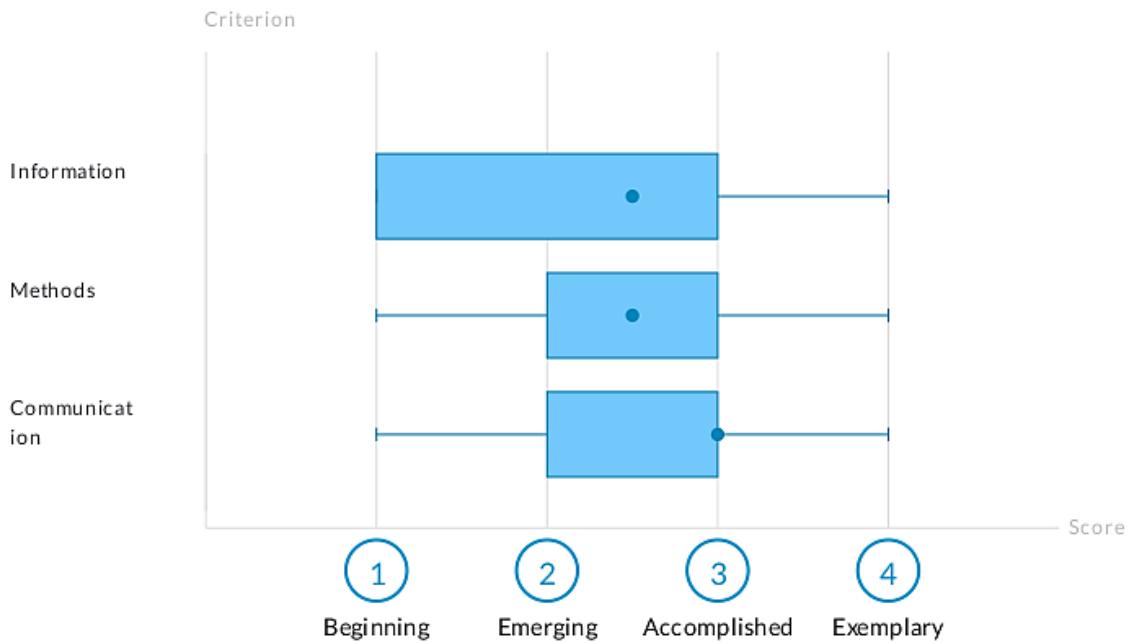

SCORE DISTRIBUTION BY CRITERION

Lower Division by Outcome

SCORE DISTRIBUTION BY CRITERION

Upper Division by Outcome


SCORE DISTRIBUTION BY CRITERION

Most notable is the growth across the information and communication outcomes. The lower division media scores were 1, which is to be expected given the nature of artifacts received. But the subsequent median scores at the upper division of 2.5 and 3, respectively, indicates growth.

SLO 1: Information

Upper Division Frequency

SCORE DISTRIBUTION BY CRITERION
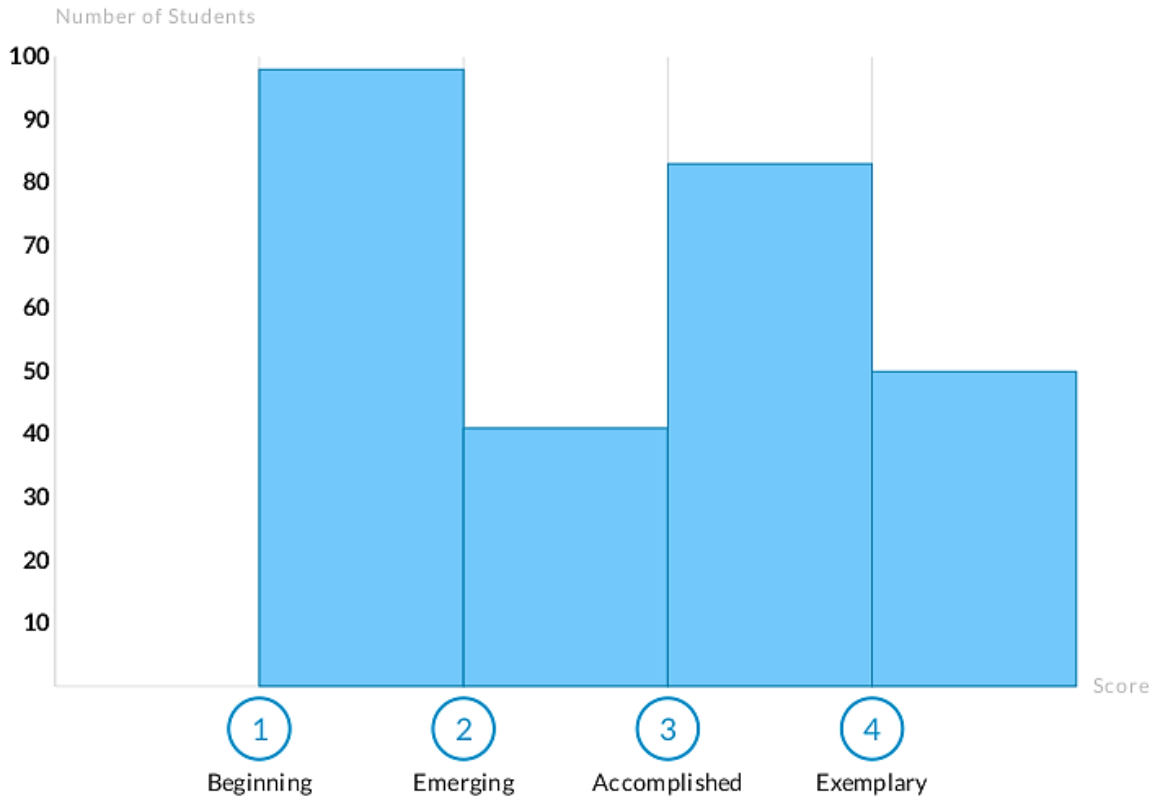
	1- Beginning	2- Emerging	3- Accomplished	4- Exemplary
# of Scores	98	41	83	50
% of Scores	36.03	15.07	30.51	18.38

At the upper division, we do see growth, which is to be expected when 96% of students' artifacts score a 1 at the lower division. Although growth is promising, it should be noted that **less than 50% of our students score "accomplished" or above** at the end of their curriculum in this outcome. There is clear room for improvement here, and the 50% mark presents us a benchmark.

SLO 3: Communication

Upper Division Frequency

SCORE DISTRIBUTION BY CRITERION
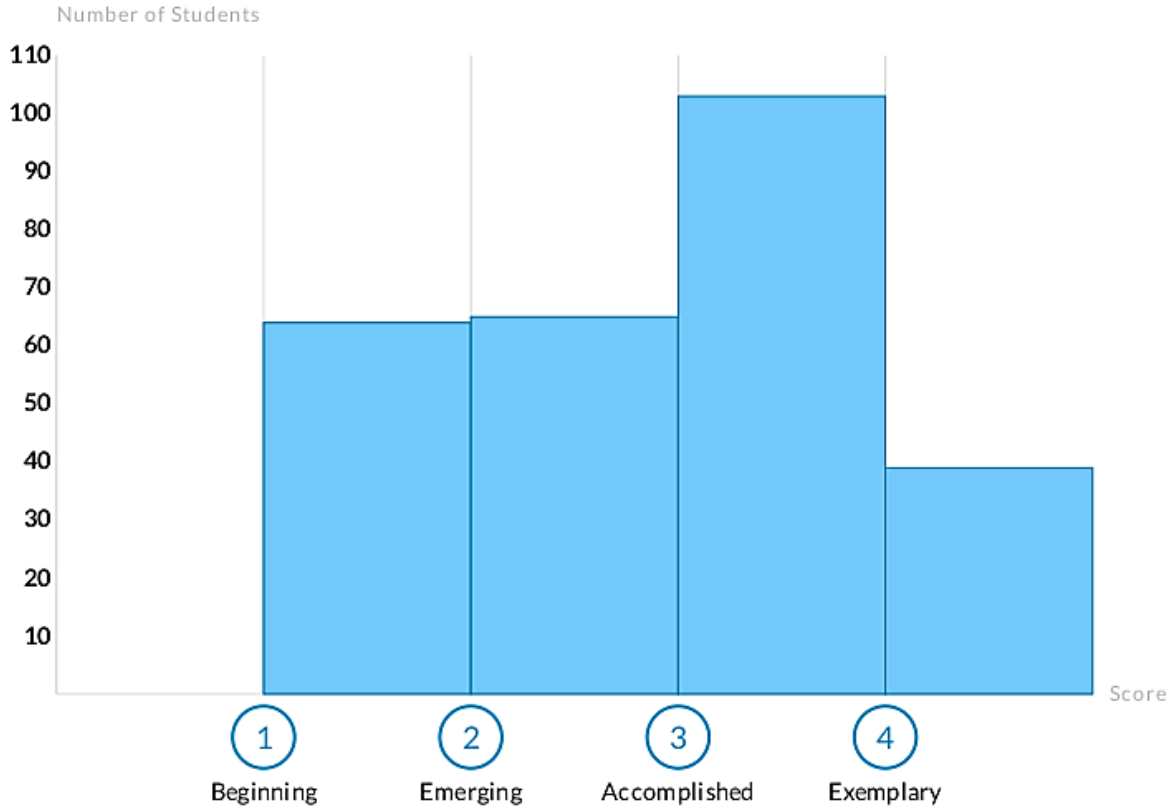
	1- Beginning	2- Emerging	3- Accomplished	4- Exemplary
# of Scores	64	65	103	39
% of Scores	23.62	23.99	38.01	14.39

At the upper division, we do see growth, which is to be expected when 97% of students' artifacts score a 1 at the lower division. Although growth is promising, it should be noted that **only 52% of our students score "accomplished" or above** at the end of their curriculum in this outcome. There is clear room for improvement here, and the 52% mark presents us a benchmark.

The data is suggestive of several things and supports the following observations and recommendations:

1) Faculty participation continues to be an issue. The office of assessment has taken the following measures to address these issues:

    a. The survey instrument has been revised to be of easier use.

    b. Faculty are identified through ARGOS and contacted multiple times via UCA Inform and targeted emails.

    c. Chairs are contacted through "Academic Council" to inform them about general education assessment efforts and to ask their assistance.

2) Given that poorly chosen or designed assignments pose a problem in terms of generating representative data, pre-cycle training needs to focus on assignment design and needs to be readily accessible and more widely used by faculty. In an attempt to address this issue, as well as a response to Covid-19, in spring 2020, pre-cycle trainings were offered on-line and posted on the UCA Core website for ease of access along with various educational materials. (see "Assessment" at https://uca.edu/core/for-faculty/). This practice will be continued in the future. Attendance was promising, and having resources readily available is prudent.

3) With respect to student learning: significant growth was noted in some areas. These numbers afford us the opportunity to set benchmarks against which to evaluate the data from the second cycle of assessment of the critical inquiry competency. However, the fact that only 50-60% of students at the upper division scored "accomplished" or higher, with markedly less than 20% of students scoring "exemplary" is worrisome. Students at the upper division should demonstrate a greater amount of mastery at higher rates if our curriculum is to be adjudged impactful. If our programming is intended to assist students in developing various intellectual competencies, we must do better than graduating students with less than 1:5 achieving a level of mastery. The office of assessment will communicate these findings with relevant stakeholders and work to promote and develop improvement measures in the curriculum to increase student performance and teacher effectiveness in this regard.

4) Given scorer feedback, the rubrics need to be revisited. Issues to be addressed include the ability of non-experts to apply the rubric in the assessment exercises as carried out at UCA and more precise and consistent wording in the rubrics to better standardize expectations among scorers.

III.   First-Year Seminars

First-Year Seminars are identified as high impact practices (HIP), but as with any HIP, regardless of what anecdotal or other data indicate, a practice is only high impact, that is, foments retention and persistence and in general promotes student success, if done well.[24] Herein lies the problem with the practice of FYS as a high impact practice at UCA. Although initially recommended by the General Education Taskforce as a HIP, from their inception FYSes have struggled to create an identity for themselves and thus have struggled to be in actuality high impact practices for first year students. First-year seminars were adopted with no clear telos or purpose, even though broad guidelines were offered in an attempt to define them. Class limits were set at 25 students, instruction in the importance and structure of general education at UCA was mandated as part of the curriculum, and these courses were assessed for written communication, collaboration, and one other Core goal depending on course content. But beyond these broad guidelines little was done to define these seminars as unique educational experiences or to intentionally design them to assist first year students as transitional students. Thus, the initial definition and implementation, although a *pro forma* high impact practice, failed to offer the experience of a genuine first year seminar.

> # FYS as HIP
>
> "First-Year Seminars are identified as high impact practices (HIP), but as with any HIP… a practice is only high impact…if done well."

FYS courses, according to the UCA Core handbook are defined as:

> First-year seminar (FYS) courses provide an intimate educational experience, integrating knowledge and skills within an academic discipline with Core competencies, and connecting students to UCA. A variety of courses can be used for the first-year seminar.
>
> FYS courses are specially designed to address Communications outcomes, including written communication and collaboration, as well as either a Critical Inquiry, Diversity, or Responsible Living outcome. In addition, FYS courses offer support for the unique needs of first-year students. FYS courses are defined by their placement in the lower division Core. FYS courses are to be introductions to the university experience providing a seminar style, intensive educational experience as well as opportunities to connect to UCA. First-Year Seminar courses provide a highly interactive, small-class learning environment for first-year students. Students work together in small groups to develop skills in teamwork and written communication as well as knowledge in one other UCA Core area (Diversity, Critical Inquiry, or Responsible Living) as it applies to the subject matter of the course. Students also learn about the importance of general education and its place at UCA. In addition, these courses offer support for the unique needs of first-year students, providing discussions about issues such as effective study skills and exam

---

[24] For a brief overview of High Impact Practices, including First-Seminars, see "High Impact Educational Practices," on the AAC&U website: https://www.aacu.org/node/4084

preparation as well as orientation information about the services UCA provides to support students. FYS instructors are provided with faculty development opportunities to address the unique needs of first year students.

This description reiterates, without effectively changing, the initial conception of an FYS as defined by the general education taskforce. The problems that remain are myriad, but include: 1) students enrolling in FYS courses are not necessarily first year students, creating problems for faculty in designing and delivering a curriculum for first year students. 2) Students may not take, nor are they required to do so, an FYS in their first semester at UCA, thus diminishing the impact of an FYS as a transitional course. 3) There is no unified or shared curriculum in FYS courses thus failing to offer students a consistent experience across sections. 4) Since there is no unified curriculum, students may or may not receive best practice pedagogy for transitional students. 5) Faculty who offer FYS courses are not necessarily trained in pedagogy for transitional students or necessarily interested in teaching first year students. These issues result in the general consequence that FYS courses are not in practice seminar style courses for first year students rooted in best practices for transitional students offering preparation for college success and connective, engaging experiences for first year students at UCA. These issues have been obvious since the implementation of the program, and several attempts have been made to remedy the situation. Dr. Held as director of the UCA Core, as well as the FYS sub-committee of the UCA Core and many dedicated faculty, have attempted to correct the problems endemic to UCA's FYS program.

First, over the course of several years, Dr. Held compiled and disseminated an FYS handbook to all faculty teaching FYS courses, as well as posting the handbook and related materials on-line.[25] The handbook consisted of both an overview of the intent and structure of FYS courses, and emphasized the need for transitional student experiences, which had not been addressed in the initial FYS proposal put forward by the taskforce. Held also included a great deal of exercises, materials, resources, and even a sample syllabus demonstrating how to integrate these materials into an FYS course, using his PHIL 2325 as an example. This was the first effort to try and systematize FYS course content and create a shared experience among FYS students.

Second, Dr. Held, in coordination with the Office of the Provost and the UCA Core Council, attempted to revise the FYS requirement. The extant requirement requires that all *first year* students take an FYS course, which exempts any student coming into UCA with 30 or more credits. However, given the prevalence of AP, IP, and concurrent/dual enrollment credits, many first time, full time degree seeking students are not by credit hour first year students. They are thus unable to take an FYS course even though they are new to campus and thus face the same challenges students with 0-29 credit hours face. A new requirement was crafted, passed the UCA Core Council but was unable to pass through the Council of Deans. The opinion of the Council was that the new, precise definition was too wordy and they preferred the extant definition, a definition that leads to enrollment difficulties due to the fact that it is insufferably broad for the purposes of a true FYS. Thus, the problems with enrollment persist.

---

[25] See https://uca.edu/core/first-year-seminars-resources/

Third, working closely with Dr. Thomas Bruick, Mapworks, a student success and early reporting software package, was promoted through the FYS courses and instructors were encouraged to use the reports from Mapworks to tailor course experiences to their students' needs. In connection with Mapworks, Dr. Bruick and Dr. Held developed, (with assistance from Dr. Gary Bunn and Dr. Julia Winden-Fey) an FYS student mentor program using a similar program at the University of Northern Iowa as a model. A pilot program was developed in AY16-17 and continued for one subsequent year, AY 17-18. Sophomore students were interviewed and selected to be peer mentors in selected FYS courses. The peer mentors took a course (EDUC 2310: Studies in Leadership Concepts), learned about student success, and then facilitated discussions in their sections to assist first year students in a more hands on, one on one manner than faculty were prepared or comfortable doing. The peer mentor program allowed us to integrate student success measures into FYS sections without affecting faculty curriculum. At the same time, as a curricular matter, Dr. Held began promoting "shell" courses, or general topic FYS courses, for example FYS in Responsible Living, so that faculty could create boutique, or true seminar style courses under this heading. Thus, these efforts together worked to create a true seminar style course with integrated success materials as well as mentoring. Unfortunately, faculty buy-in was lacking with respect to shell courses, and chairs were recalcitrant to offer more FYS courses citing concerns over student credit hour production. Thus, departmental failure to support the shell initiative lead to it being sparsely adopted. In addition, the peer mentor program failed to thrive due to several factors. It was demanding on the student mentors in terms of time and resources, and there was little institutional support for the effort. It was able to continue only for two years by sheer force of will. Ultimately, although successful, as indicated by both survey data from mentors and faculty that participated, as well as SAP data provided by the Office of Institutional Research, the diminishing returns of the effort needed to continue the program resulted in the decision to put the program on hold. The peer mentor program is viable given some moderate alterations to its structure, alternations Dr. Held has documented and looks forward to pursuing in the future.

Fourth, Dr. Held developed, in coordination with Dr. Amy Hawkins and the Center for Teaching Excellence, a Recognition Track for Excellence in Teaching First Year Students. This track offered faculty who teach First Year students an opportunity to learn about best practices in dealing with and supporting this population. Over the years this track has been one of the most successful recognition tracks in the CTE. In fact, it has been so successful that Dr. Hawkins has discussed creating a week long boot camp or mini conference in the summer organized around teaching first year students. In this regard, Dr. Held has been quite successful in offering training and development opportunities for faculty who teach FYS courses. Yet, as with all of these measures, as optional they serve the small group of faculty that are already prone to engage in these kinds of activities. Requiring a certification to be an FYS instructor would be helpful.

Finally, the FYS sub-committee of the UCA Core Council reviewed FYSes as a high impact practice and evaluated UCA's practices against the extant literature. Using articles and resources on best practices, input from local experts, such as Dr. Amy Baldwin, surveys of students at UCA, as well as historical FYS documents, the sub-committee reconsidered the FYS

requirement at UCA. The full report contains several substantive recommendations.[26] The substantive work done by the sub-committee is exactly the kind of work that ought to have been done before FYS courses were recommended as required at UCA. As it is we have simply tried *ad hoc* solutions to deep, systemic problems. The sub-committee's report provides a way to conceptualize FYS courses at UCA without disregarding what has worked or institutional requirements to which we need to be sympathetic. However, given the recent environment as well as the new direction in creating meta-majors, FYSes are in need of revision but there are now other alternatives being recommended that seek to radically revision what FYSes are at UCA. With little incentive or motivation to move forward on those conversations, we are currently in a holding pattern as regards FYS courses.

The FYS program is a good idea, and a potentially valuable experience to our students, but to date it has not been well-implemented or well-supported. A great deal of revision to the program is needed but it will take a great deal of commitment from the administration at UCA to support the needed revisions.

---

[26] See Appendix F to the Minutes from February 5, 2019 here: https://uca.edu/core/minutes/