

2007-08 General Education Assessment Activity Report

May, 2008

Revised, June 25, 2008

Long Range Assessment Planning

During the 2007-08 academic year, the University General Education Committee devoted much time to the consideration and development of a new long range assessment plan; Elaine Klein took the lead in this effort. This is the second formal, long-term plan for assessing the effectiveness of the UW-Madison General Education Requirements and the courses that meet them. The new plan builds upon previous efforts to maintain a program of continuing and meaningful assessment of student learning for purposes of effective program administration and improved student learning and sets forth a schedule of assessment priorities and activities for the next five-year period.

One of the most noteworthy changes in the new plan reflects our evolving understanding of how to effectively measure, improve, and communicate about student learning. The plan now includes a compilation of student learning outcomes based on the AAC&U LEAP Essential Learning Outcomes for each general education.

Assessment Projects, 2007-08

Comm A Assessment (SS IRB Protocol #SE2007-0025 and #SE2007-0261). This study, directed by Professor Charles Halaby, sought to answer the fundamental research question of whether Comm-A courses provide students with opportunities and experiences they need to enhance their communication skills. First-year students who had and had not satisfied the Comm-A requirement via a UW-Madison Comm-A course were surveyed at the beginning of the Fall 06-07 with respect to self-reported gains in communication skills targeted by these courses. A stratified random sample of students was selected (480 students in the Comm-A sample, 160 students in the control) and a "paper-and-pencil" survey was administered; response rates were high (78% and 88%, respectively). A variant of the study was conducted of students who experience the Comm-A course designed for non-native speakers of English. Professor Halaby's complete report and a PowerPoint presentation to the UGEC are available at <http://www.ls.wisc.edu/gened/Assessment/default.htm>.

Members of the General Education Research Group met over the course of the spring semester, 2006 and summer, 2007 with all of the Comm A course directors and with Abbie Loomis (now retired) and Sarah McDaniel of the Library and Information Literacy Instruction Program to plan this assessment project and to develop the survey instrument. The survey revealed the following:

- All students reported gains in communication skills; however, students in Comm-A courses were almost three times as likely to report that their communication

skills grew by "a fair amount" or "a lot". This was a significant and strong difference.

- When looking at fourteen specific skills addressed by these courses (e.g., the ability to use library databases, to deliver a speech, to cite sources appropriately to avoid plagiarism), students in Comm-A courses reported gains in each area at rates that were statistically significant.
- There were no differences in gains reported by male and female students, nor were there any differences in gains reported by students who took Comm-A for non-native speakers of English.

The University General Education Committee has reviewed the report and will be discussing possible recommendations and any action items.

Library and Information Literacy Instruction Program SAILS Study (SS IRB #SE-2006-0478): At the beginning of the fall semester, 2006-07, the campus Library & Information Literacy Instruction Program conducted a pre-test of a sample of incoming first-year students enrolled in Comm A courses to document the nature and extent of their information literacy skills. However, there were many complications associated with trying to contact and test incoming first-year students at the starting point of the semester. As a result, the participation rate was extremely low despite the enormous effort of many staff members. Another effort to obtain a good sample was made in summer 2007 when the SAILS test was administered at the SOAR orientation program. Because the test instrument was not available until the middle of July (toward the end of the SOAR period), only 71 students completed the test instead of the hoped-for 200; hence, the sample was very small and any conclusions drawn from it are limited.

The small number of volunteers led to a large standard error for each of the skill areas measured by SAILS and made it difficult to make meaningful comparisons between our students and the national benchmarks provided in the report; however, we can make some cautious interpretations of the results. In high school, almost all of our incoming freshmen had used library resources for a class assignment and 86% had a school librarian talk to them about how to do research. Taking into consideration the standard error issue, there seems to be no significant difference between the information literacy of incoming freshmen at UW-Madison and the national benchmark. Students at UW-Madison performed better than the institution-type benchmark at searching and retrieving sources and about the same at developing a research strategy, selecting finding tools, using finding tool features, evaluating sources, documenting sources, and understanding economic, legal, and social issues. Because of the standard error issue, it would not be appropriate to use the data to make broad conclusions about curriculum, but the results could inform some decision-making about the content of the library module of the Communication A Requirement.

We continue to consider how best to proceed in this area. While instruments such as SAILS provide a comparison of our students to a national benchmark for information literacy. This type of data, in this case insufficiently detailed to guide curriculum planning, complements the results of authentic assessments such as the 2002 Information Literacy Workbook Analysis. A forthcoming 2008 General Education Assessment Plan

will provide a framework for assessment activities and guide the design of our next information literacy study.

Articulation of Breadth and Related Essential Learning Outcomes: With other groups and units on campus, the UGEC served as a sponsor for a faculty/instructional academic staff workshop in March focused on courses taken by many first-year and transfer students and on departments offering such courses. Approximately 40 faculty and academic instructional staff from across the University participated. The event was intended to foster awareness and communication of the essential learning outcomes, with learning outcomes for breadth as a particular subset. The following questions were discussed:

- 1) Beyond the specific disciplinary content of your course, what do you want students to learn that will stay with them into the future? That is, what are students learning in your course beyond the content you teach them?

- 2) Narrowing the focus from this broad view of student learning, and moving to the more focused goals expressed in the general education requirements, what do you try to teach your students in your “breadth” area of in the general education area such as communication or quantitative reasoning?

Discussion facilitators and note-takers were assigned to each of the discussion groups and captured participant comments. Currently, the data are being organized and analyzed. A complete report will be issued within the next few months. The results of participant evaluations show a very good response; participants were quite enthusiastic about the opportunity to discuss such issues with their peers from other parts of the campus. A similar discussion was held at the March meeting of the University Academic Planning Council and UGEC members have participated in other fora centered on similar topics. The UGEC has held a preliminary discussion of the events and is planning next steps, including offering similar workshops in the future and continuing to make progress on articulating the essential learning outcomes and defining our goals in the breadth areas.

First-year Interest Group Assessment: The Director of the First-Year Interest Group (FIG) Program serves as an *ex officio* member of the the UGEC.¹ The program is connected to the General Education Program via its emphasis on providing opportunities for students to enroll in clusters of courses that meet the GERs, and for its particular emphasis on the Ethnic Studies Requirement. Results of efforts to assess the program are of interest to the committee, since the experiences of these students provide insight into how (and how well) students meet the General Education Requirements.

The FIGs program is assessed and evaluated in different ways for different purposes. “Formative assessment” measures are in place to obtain information that is

¹ A “FIG” consists of a group of 20 first-year students who live in the same residence hall or “residential neighborhood” and who also enroll in a cluster of three classes together. Each FIG cluster of courses has a central theme; the central or “synthesizing” course integrates content from the other two classes.

used as feedback to improve and fine-tune program processes and procedures. Information is gathered through faculty focus groups and meetings, student focus groups, student surveys at the beginning and end of the semester, surveys and focus groups of former FIGs students as they prepare to graduate four years later, and also through conversations and meetings with other constituencies, including staff from University Housing, the library, and the Office of the Registrar. Another level of program assessment is a “summative evaluation” that focuses on the profiles and progress of student cohorts. Specifically, this evaluation process collects, analyzes, and compares the following data for FIGs students and their non-FIG peers: ACT scores, high school class rank, cumulative grade point averages, performance in selected courses, retention, and graduation. The assessment strategy also seeks to determine the impact of the program on targeted minority students, comparing the academic performance of this sub-set of FIGs participants with their non-FIGs peers who have comparable attributes (e.g., low, mid-, and upper-level ACT scores upon entrance to the university).

Results of assessment efforts suggest that, not only do students and instructors value the overall FIGs experience, participation in the program has a markedly positive effect on student performance:

- FIGs students consistently outperform their peers semester after semester in terms of cumulative GPA.
- Retention rates for FIGs students are slightly higher than for non-FIGs students.
- Graduation rates have consistently been higher for students who began their freshman year by participating in FIGs.

For a full report, please see <http://www.lssaa.wisc.edu/figs/faculty/assessment.html> .

Dissemination of Information on Assessment Projects and Student Learning

One of our current goals in general education assessment is to provide information about assessment on a variety of levels: a) the scholarly level incorporating the research design and statistical or qualitative evidence; b) a level appropriate to the broader higher education and university community; and c) formatted to meet the needs of the broader public, including parents and other stakeholders. Adoption of the ELOs are helping us to achieve this by making discussion about what students learn more succinct and more accessible.

Specific presentations on general education assessment efforts include the following:

- Elaine Klein, Mo Noonan Bischof, and Nancy Westphal-Johnson gave a session entitled “Evaluating and Improving Foundations: General Education and Assessment” at the 2008 annual meeting of the Higher Learning Commission (April, 2008 in Chicago, IL). Chuck Halaby also worked on this paper but was unable to attend the meeting.

- Several members of the UGEC and individuals on the campus participated in various UW System and AAC&U sessions related to the Essential Learning Outcomes and assessment. These included an April meeting in Madison organized by the AAC&U and UW System attended by Aaron Brower, Jeanine Mount, Mo Noonan Bischof, and Nancy Westphal-Johnson.
- Jocelyn Milner and Mo Noonan Bischof will present a session, “Establishing Institution-wide Expectations for Student Learning at UW–Madison,” at the 2008 Teaching and Learning Symposium on May 21. During this session participants will develop an understanding of the process for setting learning expectations, and will learn about the Essential Learning Outcomes devised in the LEAP project. The session will outline a process for identifying expectations for student learning at UW–Madison based on the Essential Learning Outcomes, a product of American Association of Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) Liberal Education for America’s Promise (LEAP) project.

Impact of General Education Assessment Activities

Among other uses, results of program assessment are used to refine policy and procedures related to program administration. We cite two recent examples of changes that have had a positive impact on students:

1. When assessment projects conducted several years ago found that some courses in the Comm B and QR-B course arrays had suffered from “course drift”; in addition, some instructors teaching courses meeting the Ethnic Studies Requirement were unaware that their courses were so designated. The UGEC approved a policy to generate formal reminders to departments (to be shared with instructors) indicating that since these courses meet particular requirements, they are expected to meet specific criteria. Follow up research into instructor perceptions of the General Education Curriculum revealed that instructors in these programs reflect a much better sense of the role these courses play in students’ academic experience than do instructors in areas of the curriculum that do not receive these reminders.
2. The College of Agricultural and Life Sciences (CALs) has revised its baccalaureate degree requirements based on UGEC assessment findings. CALs had required its students to take an additional three credits of coursework in oral communication if the student did not satisfy Comm A and B in courses specified by CALs as meeting their expectations regarding communication. UGEC assessment efforts determined that Comm A and B courses do emphasize oral communication and students learn skills associated with oral communication. CALs faculty voted to eliminate the redundant CALs requirement.

Both of these changes reflect efforts to improve the student curricular experience. The first ensures that faculty teaching courses designated as meeting requirements are aware of course criteria and can therefore more clearly convey learning outcomes associated with those criteria. (The results of this exercise also bolster aspirations to develop more

clearly stated criteria and learning outcomes for other aspects of the General Education Curriculum, most notably, in “general breadth” courses.) The second helps to ensure that curricular requirements at the college level integrate with, complement, and do not unnecessarily duplicate the General Education Requirements, reducing redundancy, so students may proceed more efficiently toward completion of their degrees.

Submitted by the **University General Education Committee:**

Chair: Nancy Westphal-Johnson, Associate Dean, L&S Administration

Term Members:

Larry Bank, Civil and Environmental
Engineering (Semester I)

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Jacqueline Hitchon, Life Sciences
Communication

Jim Johannes, School of Business

Susan Johnson, History, also, Ethnic Studies
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Experience

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Student Members appointed by ASM

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Hilary Minor

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Michael Olneck, Educational Policy Studies
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Tori Richardson, Assistant Dean, L&S
Student Academic Affairs

Ex Officio:

Mo Noonan Bischof, Assistant to the
Provost

Aaron Brower, Vice Provost for Teaching
and Learning, Social Work

Richard Brualdi, Math Quantitative
Reasoning Liaison (Semester I)

Chuck Halaby, Research Director for
General Education Assessment,
Sociology, and Associate Dean for
Social Sciences, L&S

Brad Hughes, Writing Center and Writing
Across the Curriculum

Elaine Klein, L&S Administration

Sarah McDaniel, Library & Information
Literacy Instruction Program

Gloria Mari-Beffa, Math, Quantitative
Reasoning Liaison (Semester II)

Sherry Reames, English, Communication
Liaison

General Education Research Committee

Chuck Halaby, Research Director for
General Education Assessment
Committee, Sociology, and Associate
Dean for Social Sciences, L&S

Elaine M. Klein, L&S Administration

Nancy Westphal-Johnson, Chair, Associate
Dean for Academic Administration and
Undergraduate Education, College of
Letters and Science

Jim Wollack, Testing and Evaluation
Services