

**Assessment Plan for General Education at the University of Wisconsin-Madison**

Submitted to the UW-Madison Assessment Council

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## **Mission and Purpose of the General Education requirements at UW-Madison:**

*The purpose of the General Education requirements is to ensure that every graduate of the University of Wisconsin-Madison acquires the essential core of an undergraduate education that establishes the foundations for living a productive life, being a citizen of the world, appreciating aesthetic values, and engaging in life-long learning in a continually changing world. For this reason, these core requirements provide for breadth across the humanities and arts, social studies, biological sciences and physical sciences; competence in communication, critical thinking and analytical skills appropriate for a university-educated person; and investigation of the issues raised by living in a culturally diverse society.*

Prior to implementing the General Education Requirements in 1996, UW-Madison had no common undergraduate requirements with the single exception of an Ethnic Studies requirement adopted separately by the individual schools and colleges. Widespread opinion on campus was that students, particularly at the freshman and sophomore levels, were not receiving the type of instruction in writing/communication/information literacy that one would expect of an undergraduate experience at UW-Madison. A lack of general education requirements in quantitative reasoning meant that some students never took college level courses that help hone skills in this area. There was also wide support among the faculty for general education requirements in breadth areas of natural science, humanities/literature/art, and social studies since previous requirements varied widely across the campus.

It is important to keep in mind that the General Education requirements at UW-Madison form a very modest general education package in terms of scope and number of credits required in each area. Additionally, the program allows for great diversity of course choice and is far from a “core” curriculum model.

## **Administrative Structure and Decision-Making:**

The General Education requirements at UW-Madison are governed by the University Academic Planning Council. The UAPC has assigned the overall academic administration of the program to the College of Letters and Science, which acts as a trustee on behalf of all schools and colleges. A significant portion of a senior L&S administrative staff position and well as other L&S staff support is devoted to this work. The College also has formed a General Education Committee with representatives from schools and colleges throughout the University. In May, 2002, the Provost charged the General Education Committee with the responsibility to recommend priorities for assessment of the campus-wide general education curriculum.

## **Goals for Assessment in General Education:**

Articulation and assessment of student learning outcomes, of course, are the key goals in this area. To this point, most of the assessment efforts in General Education have been directed at its Communication and Quantitative Reasoning components and our articulation of goals and outcomes are most developed in these two areas. The Verbal Assessment and Quantitative Assessment programs have identified learning goals for courses meeting these requirements, and have routinely carried out large and small scale studies of both outcomes and attitudinal measures.

The Ethnic Studies requirement is also a component of the General Education program at UW-Madison. This requirement was recently reviewed and assessed in a two and one-half year study by a special review committee and changes to the original criteria were adopted by the University Academic Planning Council in March, 2003. The review calls for periodic assessment of the requirement at least every ten years.

While both the General Education Committee and the University Academic Planning Council have urged that we more fully articulate the broad goals of the overall program to our faculty, staff, and students and assess our efforts in this area, we have not had the resources to move forward with this. Articulation and assessment of the breadth components of the General Education requirements are also not very far advanced at this point.

Assessment in the General Education program at UW-Madison is intended to evaluate programs and the contributions of individual courses to educational programs, and is not intended to evaluate individual courses or instructors.

## **Assessment Strategy:**

Assessment resources are limited and the General Education program has benefited greatly from the assessment resources provided by the Provost's Office. Regularizing this process over the next period of time should provide the General Education Committee with a stable context within which to plan an overall assessment strategy. It will also allow us to plan an overall strategy that is more systematic and comprehensive than has been possible to this date.

Assessment of general education programs and their constituent parts is both on-going and episodic. This ensures continued monitoring of overall progress in key areas such as Verbal Assessment and Quantitative Reasoning, while also providing resources to carry out a variety of specialized projects in different time periods and phases. We are interested in assessment of course-level outcomes, program outcomes, and performance in "higher level" courses as well as in assessment of students' later uses of the "tools" they have learned through their general education experience.

The overarching assessment strategy for general education recognizes that students and student learning need to be considered on a variety of levels-- formative, summative, and attitudinal. This requires the use of multiple approaches mostly rooted in social science research practices such as database analysis, focus groups, survey work, etc.

The end-loop cycle of the assessment strategy calls for information about assessment results to be shared with interested groups on campus (course instructors, the General Education Committee, the University Academic Planning Council, Deans of appropriate schools and colleges, etc.) so that necessary changes can be considered in the context of overall campus needs and resources.

### **Assessment Gaps, Directions for Development or Further Inquiry :**

We do expect that in the future use of the newly developed retention database of students will be a widely-used tool in answering questions connected to the assessment of our general education programs. We are fortunate that staff in the Quantitative Assessment Program are available for wider work in general education assessment and are expert at the use of this and related databases.

As stated above, one gap in our overall program is the articulation and assessment of the General Education requirements as a meaningful whole. This is a large undertaking given the structure of the requirements, the diversity of courses that can be used to fulfill the requirements, and the multiple missions of the undergraduate schools and colleges on the campus. We need to work toward a context in which students, faculty, and staff are familiar with the goals of our General Education program and can articulate how a given course or program helps students realize them. For example, we would like to work toward instructors recognizing the value in explicitly sharing with students the importance of their general education experiences in developing skills such as constructing a coherent argument, understanding how quantitative data can inform knowledge, and the ability to conduct research. We would like students to be able to demonstrate the ability to take what they have learned and describe how it has helped them, both in skill level and in further coursework.

### **Five Year General Timeline for Assessment:**

Over the next five years, we expect assessment efforts to focus on the following issues:

- study in how the retention database and similar tools can aid in assessment activities, including pilot and problem-based inquiries;
- continuation of the Quantitative Assessment Project's services to departments and courses;
- continuation of Verbal Assessment activities;
- comprehensive assessment of the articulation, communication, and understanding of general education goals and requirements to UW-Madison faculty, staff, students (and prospective students);
- study of the courses used to fulfill general education requirements by students in undergraduate programs which have little or no breadth requirements beyond those mandated in the campus-wide General Education requirements.

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