

**General Education Learning Outcomes and Program Assessment:**  
*Issues, Concerns, and Recommendations*

**A Report from the Assessment and Teaching Enhancement Center**

**Presented to the Council on General Education**

**April 11, 2007**

**Request from the Council on General Education:** Reduce the number of learning outcomes as identified by the General Education Council (in the revised document dated 2-22-06) to approximately six, and identify “external” assessments to measure each of them, as suggested by President Lane.

**Initial Recommendation:** Before proceeding with substantive changes, take the time to develop systems and processes to ensure a successful general education program and assessment design that can verify we are achieving what we articulate in our goals and outcomes.

The following issues and concerns are the foundation of this recommendation. It is important to recognize the issues and circumstances surrounding successful program revision and assessment are complex and multidimensional. The following is intended to serve as a guide for our thought process:

### **Important considerations and related issues**

First, we need to:

- A) Consider issues pertinent to our purpose and goals
- B) Construct a long-term plan to implement and measure learning outcomes that include(s):
  - 1) A realistic time-line for a multi-stage plan.
  - 2) Shared responsibility for achieving learning outcomes
  - 3) Designated multiple methods of assessment (e.g., external, internal, direct, and indirect). (See Below)
  - 4) Adequate support and resources are available from both faculty and the administration. This includes commitment from the administration to provide adequate funds, time, and recognition of those involved. This also includes intrinsic and extrinsic rewards for faculty involved in assessment activities such as merit, faculty development opportunities, time or load reassigned to assessment, conference travel, awards, etc.
  - 5) Published (internal) guidelines on how information-based decision making will occur at ESU for General Education learning outcome data; this should apply to course data as well as information that spans multiple courses.
  - 6) A procedure or structure to manage all aspects of the assessment process (e.g., handling data, reporting data, making decisions). The clear identification of responsibility for these processes should be part of an assessment plan.

### **Issues (not necessarily in order of priority):**

#### Assessment Practice

- 1) The match between external assessments and educational experience through course-work must be examined and supported by faculty. Ideally, it would flow from the collective wisdom of the faculty who share responsibility for each specific goal or outcome. This is an important element in developing a culture of learning. It will be challenging to be successful in achieving our goals and effectively assessing our outcomes without this connection. General Education is of paramount importance to accrediting bodies such as the Higher Learning Commission. We cannot just measure; we **MUST** be successful at it (i.e., achieve the learning outcomes).

- 2) If students can choose courses that avoid content or abilities measured by external assessment(s) (e.g., quantitative ability), then our process of achieving our goals is likely flawed, and the summative evaluation data will almost certainly illustrate adverse outcomes. Pre-post designs and linkage-type assessments tend to show value-added results. These can be used to document student learning effectively. Focusing on achievement of certain thresholds especially in comparisons with national norms or other schools is likely to show ESU performing lower and potentially at unacceptably low levels. (See HLC comment below). The new general education set of course requirements should be developed with this in mind.
- 3) External assessments can be expensive and time consuming, especially for Goal 3 *Acquiring Knowledge of a Wide Range of Academic Disciplines* and Goal 4 *Making Interdisciplinary Connections*. These goals will be even more challenging to assess. They represent the idealism of what we do in terms of being good educators, but the reality makes it almost impossible to measure. Norm referenced external assessments already exist for many academic areas and we could adopt these; some are broader in scope such as the CAAP science assessment while others are discipline specific. If we wish to keep Goal 3, we must make it measurable. For example, we could insist students demonstrate mastery of a certain number of academic disciplines as measured by these external assessments in addition to passing the courses. However, it will be expensive and challenging to implement.
- 4) Some external assessments are normative and do not provide diagnostic feedback. How will external data be used to make decisions that affect student learning when it is not diagnostic (i.e., it is normative)? What will the data mean to faculty?

### Curriculum

- 1) Can we identify, organize, and reward a system of “shared responsibility” to achieve desired performance on the learning outcomes? In other words, how will students engage in learning the particular knowledge/skills and make connections from multiple courses? A culture of shared responsibility and frequent reinforcement is likely to be most successful. If the duty falls upon a specific department or discipline to increase or maintain performance, will it confirm fears that assessment is in a punitive tool that suppresses effective teaching? Do the proposed revisions in General Education requirements promote shared responsibility?
- 2) The diversity of instruction is reflected in the learning outcomes. Cutting the learning outcomes too much may not effectively communicate the diversity of our courses or accurately reflect the values and effectiveness of our faculty. This may also affect marketing our institution. Our challenge is to be more effective in achieving and assessing our overarching goals while not diminishing the other important aspects of educating our students we already do. Assessment is not intended to sterilize creative teaching and learning.

### Faculty “Buy in”

- 1) Use of external assessments may promote faculty fears of “teaching to a test” and losing freedom in their courses (i.e., the test will drive the curriculum). How can faculty become a part of the “external” process? Are there ways to use and defend internal assessments (e.g., embedded assessments) along with external assessments? It is not wise to have just one type of assessment for any outcome.
- 2) Faculty feared having the outcomes they identified during the forum(s) being reworked to reflect the desires of a cadre’ of people behind the scenes (as stated from faculty during the process during last year’s forum). How will faculty perceive re-crafting the learning outcomes and how will this affect a plan for “shared responsibility?”

### **Recommendations and Suggestions:**

- 1) Demand a realistic time line and back it up with a sound plan of action. This is a process, not a race. A poor plan today does not equal a good plan tomorrow; it creates even greater challenges in the future. Most universities that revised their general education curriculum and their assessment strategies took 3-5 years to develop it. The expectations of the HLC have increased significantly since their last visit and the standards by which we will be judged next time are likely to exceed where we are in our current process. Changes not based on a sound process are likely to embarrass us in the long run.
- 2) Build the assessment design over time. Identify 1-3 outcomes a year and develop the evaluation design to match it. Start small and work up in quantity and quality in each direction. This should help foster a culture of trust, especially when funds, time, other resources are provided. It does not have to be done all at once.
- 3) Take charge of assessment. If we do not take charge of defining what we value, and take the time to craft assessments to measure it (and vigorously defend it) IT WILL be imposed upon us. The push for external assessments is likely to intensify from the HLC as well as from other sources (e.g., the Spelling's Commission). Inaction and fear of assessment will force us to do things we do not want, and experience what we fear experiencing the most.
- 4) Consider a variety of assessments both external, internal, and internal (but "non-home department" scored). External assessments have to be done to some extent, but if the internal assessments have proven validity/reliability, it could stand on its own. We must be able to demonstrate this to our constituencies in a highly convincing manner.
- 5) Involve the faculty in the process. Have them explore alternative tests so they can evaluate the content validity. Encourage creative ideas. This may range from different processes to having them identify course assessments that match the learning outcomes AND that can be used as embedded assessments for program evaluation. Ask them about the resources they need to complete the tasks of assessment successfully (e.g., creating, administering, scoring, and reporting). Ask them about how "shared responsibility" could be facilitated in their content area and across disciplines.
- 6) Have small groups of faculty in each area of interest work on each learning outcome. Encourage them to explore assessment options with colleagues in their department(s) and at other institutions.
- 7) Consider various sampling and evaluation designs.
  - A) Consider pre-post designs for assessment whenever possible. A window HLC created is especially important to institutions such as ours. If we look at summative evaluations on external assessments (e.g., thresholds), we will be competing with more selective and better-funded colleges and universities. It will be exceedingly challenging to defend these. For example, thresholds where eighty percent of students across the nation exceed our stated outcome for performance in quantitative ability would be embarrassing. The same holds in specific disciplines. For example, biology faculty may not be comfortable ensuring their students are all in the 50<sup>th</sup> percentile or above on a nationally-standardized field test. Instead, we can consider using linkage studies if possible, or other pre-post (or value added) designs; this allows us to effectively document student learning.
  - B) Consider formative assessments so that program modifications can be made in time. Failure is expected in some cases and we can overcome this when we show that a mechanism for improvement exists. We must ensure the administration will support and fund this mechanism.

- C) Sampling (i.e., a sub-sample of a small but representative group may involve fewer resources and time; however, it is certain to be subject to greater scrutiny. We must be prepared to defend a rigorous sampling technique.
  - D) We could sample the population every other year as another option. This will save time and money. However, it has challenges as well. We will not be able to address issues as quickly, and anomalies may be magnified. How many years of data will it take to recognize we should embark on appropriate change? Will we change based on an anomaly after only one or two rounds of assessment data. Furthermore, the potential for possible low(er) student performance and our “end data” will show us in a poor light, especially when we do not have time to modify our programs. As long as we have multiple measures of outcomes, less frequent sampling is more tenable.
  - E) Remember the effect of exemptions, transfer students, transfer courses, etc. on the data we collect on math, reading, writing performance, and other areas. We should involve the Office of Institutional Research to help disaggregate data so we can make effective policy decisions (e.g., exemptions, transfers) based on assessment.
  - F) We should encourage everyone to consider measuring multiple outcomes with one assessment when appropriate and possible. For example, a writing assignment, can it be used to evaluate critical thinking, content knowledge (Goal 3), interdisciplinary connections (Goal 4), as internal assessment to augment external assessment. “Discipline specific writing” may also be used by a department for their program evaluations required separately by the Board of Regents. Beyond being efficient, this represents shared responsibility, and efficient use of shared resources.
- 8) Choose external assessments that are criterion based (i.e., measured against specific standards of performance) rather than normative based (i.e., measured against a specific group performance). This will inform programs AND students about specific aspects of learning. It will also help us avoid comparisons with more selective universities.
- 9) Include embedded assessments whenever possible. Although we will have to have external assessments, it is a better practice to have multiple measures of each outcome. Embedded assessments can provide rich perspective and better understanding of what we do well and how we can improve. Embedded assessments may be identified from courses by the alignment charts the General Education Council validated during the review of course proposals or some other process. Embedded assessments offer faculty the opportunity to incorporate what they value the most.
- 10) Include the following in all group discussions on assessment and program design:
- A) Does the assessment have:
    - 1) Consequential validity—does it make a difference? Is it really used or is it done only as an exercise to appease the administration or accrediting bodies?
    - 2) Pedagogical validity—does it lead to improvement? Do the results change teaching or facilitate student learning?
    - 3) Content validity—Do faculty agree with the fit between the assessment and the course-work?
  - B) Is (does) the assessment:
    - 1) Cost effective?
    - 2) Provide reasonably accurate and truthful results (e.g., multiple assessments provide triangulation and reduce criticisms for using more internal assessments than external assessments)?
    - 3) Valued? Are (or how are) faculty rewarded for their efforts to engage in assessment or inquiry?

- 5) Make it possible to identify target performance? What is “an adequate student performance?” We must have targets.
- C) Can we use “direct” evidence from internal sources (e.g., embedded assessments such as comprehensive exams, research papers, projects or other measurable assessments of student learning).

### **Conclusion**

Several steps must take place before we continue because our current process of reform in general education is not fully consistent with success. Without considerable effort to address the major issues outlined above, we are almost certain to face extraordinary internal and external challenges, especially with respect to assessment. We do not have to fail and then start over under pressure when we cannot measure or achieve what we said we would if we take the time to do this properly the first time. We have the opportunity to approach these fundamental changes in a constructive manner that is consistent with what we aspire for our students and the university. Let us begin together to develop systems and processes that facilitate a culture of student learning and shared responsibility.