

HLC Report

What progress has occurred in assessment of general education?

UND continues to prepare for its visit with members of review team from the Higher Learning Commission (HLC) on April 7-8, 2008. Our site visitors will be focused specifically on assessment of student learning, and they will be aware that assessment of general education was identified as an area of particular weakness at the time of our previous comprehensive accreditation visit. What progress have we made?

Since the time of the last HLC team visit, a number of assessment projects have been conducted to examine student learning outcomes within the general education program. Some have focused on direct assessment and others have been indirect. Most measures have been home-grown, although results from OIR-administered standardized surveys are also available.

The Longitudinal Study. A major longitudinal student interview project, conducted over a six-year period (in process at the time of the last visit), provided excellent general insight into students' experiences with the general education program and their perceived achievement of general education goals. Ten specific recommendations were made based on the findings of that study. All ten have had some impact on the revision of general education at UND and most of are now implemented in some fashion. A summary of recommendations is included here:

1. Create more opportunities on campus for regular discussion of general education, its meanings, purposes, and methods.
2. Ensure that the purposes and goals of general education are integrated throughout the University – not just in courses designated as fulfilling General Education Requirements.
3. As changes in the General Education Program are considered, draw on the results of this study to refine the present goals.
4. Re-examine and articulate more carefully the goal of “World Cultures.” Clarify its meaning and develop strategies for embedding meaningful experiences related to it into students' education.
5. Although some General Education courses clearly play a foundational or pre-requisite role for certain major courses, others may be especially valuable when linked with major courses or taken later in students' academic careers. For this reason, encourage students to integrate their General Education Requirements “vertically” through their course of study rather than layering them “horizontally.”
6. Establish new ways to increase student-faculty interaction and mutual understanding.
7. Provide faculty development opportunities focused on designing courses to meet general education goals.
8. Re-examine the structure of advising with an eye to making it more developmental and more intentional in reinforcing the common purposes and goals of a university education.
9. Develop and implement a comprehensive and continuous assessment plan that documents student learning as it relates to general education purposes and goals

10. Fund initiatives that support the above recommendations and strategies. In addition to generating this list of recommendations, findings from that longitudinal study led to questions which provided the framework for four additional studies.

Additional Indirect Assessments. The first follow-up study was a goals survey. Chairs of departments offering general education courses were surveyed regarding goals addressed within departmental classes. Data were compiled for virtually all classes, and the resulting analysis showed which general education goals were “aimed at” most frequently, and which classes included specific attention to each of the various goals. This survey was conducted before most departments had begun submitting assessment data during revalidation, and it provided indirect evidence of intentionality about general education goals.

In the second study, students’ course evaluation data were analyzed. Students in general education courses are routinely asked the degree to which each of the goals is achieved within the class, providing indirect student perception evidence of learning around the goals. In fact, these data yielded no new insights, largely because students generally answered, essentially, “yes, I learned at least some of that” (on a Likert scale) to questions about achievement of any general education goal in any general education course. This finding was not supported by other data.

A third kind of indirect data was collected from the Registrar’s Office, which provided a summary of how frequently each general education course was taken (a course frequency summary for general education). Results from the study showed that UND has a de facto core (a collection of about 30 classes that account for most general education credits), although the general education program is technically delivered through a distribution model with more than 300 courses on the validated list.

Fourth, a transcript analysis was done by pulling a random sample of 50 transcripts of recent graduates, and analyzing them for completed general education courses. When matching the list of courses from their transcripts against the information collected in the goals survey, it became possible to see that some goals (e.g., critical thinking) were repeatedly emphasized in the general education portion of virtually every student’s curriculum. Other goals (e.g, familiarity with cultures) were addressed much less frequently (on the transcript of one student, the goal was addressed in only a single class), and students could conceivably graduate with virtually no exposure to the goals.

Direct Assessments. Data from the indirect assessments were collected and analyzed in 2004-05. At the conclusion of a year spent examining indirect assessment data, UND implemented its first direct outcomes assessment of general education goals, beginning with the goals of written communication and critical thinking. Rubrics were developed by a faculty team, papers were collected from senior level courses, faculty volunteers were trained on the rubrics, and separate teams scored papers for the two selected goals. Findings from that project were posted to the web and disseminated through a regular faculty development lunch series called “On Teaching.”

Since then, another rubric has been developed, this time for cultural familiarity, and another direct assessment project was designed and implemented (in both 2006 and 2007). This goal was selected for outcomes assessment based on findings in the longitudinal study and the transcript analysis, both of which suggested that the cultural familiarity goal was a particular weakness for UND students. The method used was a small group “oral examination” process with individual participants (volunteers from a randomly selected pool of students) scored according to the criteria on the rubric.

At the same time as these outcomes assessments of general education were being developed and implemented, data from course-based direct assessments also began being reviewed by GERC members during revalidation. Sub-committee members summarize assessment findings, and the results are folded into the assessment process, providing additional information about student learning in relation to general education goals.

Other Data Collection. The current University Assessment plan stipulates many of the assessment methods described above (revalidation data, direct outcomes assessments, OIR survey data, longitudinal study data, and transcript analysis). It also mentions collecting data as recorded in assessment reports prepared by academic departments (which frequently have program outcomes that align fairly closely with general education goals) and by specified non-academic organizations. Within the last two years, such data have been collected during Assessment Committee reviews, but the data are extremely preliminary and the goals are currently in transition, making the findings less than useful to the institution at this point (although such data are important to the departments involved in collection and analysis). When the new general education program (now to be named “Essential Studies”) is fully implemented, department chairs will be asked to identify alignments between general education program goals and departmental goals, and more systematic analysis of such data will become possible.

Examples of Loop-Closing Activities. Two examples of closing the loop demonstrate the use of assessment results. First is regarding the cultural familiarity goal. One key finding of the longitudinal study was that students perceive that goal as the least important and least emphasized within their courses. Data from the transcript analysis supported that finding. As a result, the cultural familiarity goal was one of the first for which direct assessment was sought, and results corroborated the notion that some UND students graduate with little understanding of cultures other than their own. Based on that finding, the Essential Studies program includes two required “cultures” courses (one was required in the old program). Further, the number of program goals was reduced, largely so that each goal would receive greater attention. Reassessment (after the plan is implemented) will be necessary to see if that occurs as planned.

A second “closing the loop” example occurred based on the finding, from the transcript analysis, that UND has a de facto “core curriculum” of about 30 courses which comprise the vast majority of the general education credits. Based on that finding, members of the General Education Task Force engaged in extensive discussion about options for creating an official “core.” A sub-committee was assigned to conduct research options and develop a proposal for consideration. Although the proposal was ultimately rejected by

members of the task force, this serious reconsideration of the mechanism for delivering general education curriculum was provoked by assessment results and represents a loop-closing activity.

Planning for the Future. In fact, the need for high quality, meaningful assessment processes was one factor that drove the entire general education review process. Faculty committees are currently developing rubrics for assessing student learning on each goal within the new program, and another committee is updating and revising the University Assessment Plan to reflect changes in the general education program. Both groups should complete their work by mid-Spring 2008.

At the time of UND's last comprehensive visit, assessment of general education was cited as an area of weakness. Since that time, assessment data have been collected through several different mechanisms, including both direct and indirect methods. Assessment findings have been the impetus for substantially revising UND's program of general education, culminating in the development of Essential Studies. Task Force members considered the establishment of plans for on-going assessment to be a major priority within the new program. As the transition to Essential Studies occurs this year (2008), we have in place several committees that are working on planning to support assessment (several rubric development committees, a committee to revise the general education/Essential Studies portion of the University Assessment Plan, multiple committees working to establish revalidation criteria for various goals and requirements). This work will ensure that plans are in place to continue collecting information about learning within general education/Essential Studies, and using that information for on-going program improvement.