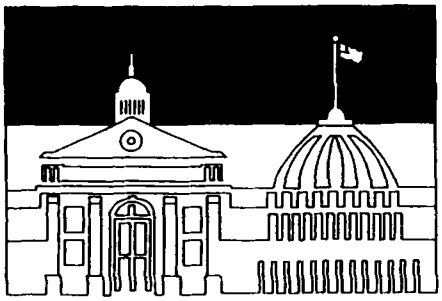

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Faculty-Developed Approaches to Assessing General Education Outcomes

Trudy W. Banta

Faculty contemplating an outcomes assessment initiative frequently ask, "What should we do first? Where should we begin?" An appropriate response is "Start with the questions that are most important to the campus community. What are the student outcomes about which you would most like to have evidence of progress?"

The answer to the last question will certainly differ from one campus to another and from time to time at a given institution. But, at any particular time, interest in student learning as a result of experiences in the general education program, or the transfer curriculum at community colleges, will be of paramount concern at many institutions across the country. If a new design for general education is contemplated, under development, or in an early stage of implementation, faculty interest in evaluating its effectiveness may be sufficiently high to make general education a logical focus for early assessment efforts.

As faculty begin to consider ways to assess the impact of the program of liberal studies that lays the foundation for upper-division work, they may be tempted to move directly to the task of selecting or developing measuring instruments. They cannot proceed very far along this path, however, without direction from a statement of expected student outcomes. That is, what do the faculty hope students will know and be able to do as a result of their experience in the general education program?

Until very recently, most goals for general education and disciplinary curricula have been stated in terms of concepts faculty will teach rather than skills students will develop.

Achieving broad consensus for this statement of expected outcomes may be the single most important benefit of the entire assessment enterprise. Until very recently, such statements were rare in higher education. Most goals for general education (and curricula in the disciplines, for that matter) are stated in terms of the concepts faculty will teach rather than the understanding and skills students will develop. Specifying the ends (goals or intended outcomes) to justify the means (assessment methods) may require wearying debate and intellectual struggle, but when faculty can finally agree on the ends, they can

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implement the program with a much stronger sense of shared purpose.

If assessment is to fulfill its promise for suggesting directions for improvement, it must be based on clear statements of goals for students, but its success also depends on the existence of a formal process for monitoring the curriculum, to ensure that the goals are being implemented. Faculty must provide oversight—periodic review of course syllabi, student assignments, and classroom tests—to guarantee that students have access to the experiences they need in order to develop the knowledge and skills inherent in the faculty vision of the competent student. If assessment procedures indicate that students are failing to achieve a certain goal, the monitoring process will assist in determining the source of the problem and the means for correcting it.

In stimulating faculty consideration and discussion of general education outcomes for students, of the supporting curriculum and instructional methods, of the quality of student learning, and of means for improving all the foregoing, the use of some standardized exams may be productive. However, large-scale studies conducted in New Jersey, Washington, and Tennessee and involving some of the best-known commercial tests available for assessment of general education outcomes have indicated that, at best, these exams test only a small fraction of the knowledge and skills specified in most college statements of goals for general education. At worst, students' scores on some of the exams are so heavily dependent on verbal and quantitative aptitude that the tests offer little or no additional information beyond that derived from tests of entering ability, such as the ACT or the SAT. For these reasons, the remainder of this essay describes faculty-developed approaches to assessing general education outcomes. While the work on these measures is still in its infancy, and claims to technical adequacy are not yet well founded, the measures do, by definition, assess what faculty consider important, and they engage faculty in the healthy discussion and exploration of effectiveness that are characteristic of good assessment programs. In this presentation, examples are given of each of the critical components of the assessment process—goal setting, monitoring implementation, and gathering evidence of effectiveness.

Setting Goals

Faculty at Alverno College in Milwaukee and King's College in Pennsylvania are recognized as pioneers in basing programs of liberal education on statements of specific objectives for learners. At King's, for instance, faculty have been working for more than a decade on an approach designed to strengthen in each King's graduate eight transferable skills of liberal learning: critical thinking, creative thinking and problem-solving strategies, writing, oral communication, quantitative analysis, computer literacy, library and information technologies, and values awareness.

In the mid 1980s, the state higher education coordinating agencies in Virginia and New Jersey issued mandates for assessment that included explicit references to the need for goal setting. At James Madison University in Virginia, faculty adopted a comprehensive approach to student development during college that included goals for cognitive, moral, and psychosocial growth. In New Jersey, all public institutions were required to submit to the State Board of Higher Education by June 1989 faculty-developed statements of goals for general education that would serve as the basis for assessment plans. These documents were reviewed by external consultants, and each institution subsequently received a detailed written assessment of the perceived strengths and weaknesses of its goals statement.

Monitoring Implementation

Aubrey Forrest, in a series of national workshops sponsored by ACT during the mid 1980s, emphasized the need for conducting a curriculum audit—a careful ongoing monitoring by faculty of the courses designed to promote student achievement of an institution's goals for general

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education. Forrest collected materials from a variety of institutions that illustrated how faculty can construct course syllabi and exam questions to ensure that the general education program presented by faculty actually develops stated outcomes in students.

At Alverno College, every faculty member is continually conscious of the various levels of each of eight generic abilities that students must develop, and every course is designed to promote learning of one or more of the abilities. Students participate in faculty-designed performance-based assessments in each course, as well as at key points outside courses.

At Longwood College in Virginia, a transcript has been developed to record student involvement in college activities that contribute to the accomplishment of 14 faculty-developed goals for knowledge and skills. Students also complete an "Involvement Survey" that helps them note their progress toward the 14 goals and detect areas of development they may be neglecting.

Assessment Strategies

Faculty at King's College employ course-embedded assessment in order to give systematic feedback to students about their academic progress toward the development of the eight transferable skills of liberal learning that guide the King's approach to general education. All core-curriculum courses use pre- and post assessments that are common throughout all sections of the course and are designed by faculty teams. The post assessment is an integral part of the final grade for each course, and thus student motivation to do well is ensured. Each student has a "competence-growth plan," containing a record of his or her progress toward achieving the eight generic skills. As students complete their assessment experiences in designated courses, progress is noted in their individual plans. The activities associated with implementing this course-embedded assessment model serve to evaluate the outcomes-oriented curriculum designed by the King's faculty.

At Kean College in New Jersey, faculty have developed essay items to evaluate knowledge of content and critical thinking skills in five areas. These items are incorporated into course exams, and students' responses are read twice—once by the course instructor for purposes of assigning a grade, and again by a faculty committee looking at response patterns across students and across courses for purposes of evaluating the effectiveness of the general education curriculum. The Kean faculty also gather evaluative data from faculty and student surveys designed to elicit perceptions about the curriculum.

As Richard Larson notes in this issue, portfolios are growing in popularity as assessment tools that can be used in a wide variety of settings. Materials that might be collected in a portfolio include course assignments, research papers, materials from group projects, artistic productions, self-reflective essays, correspondence, and taped presentations. Student performances can be recorded on audiotapes or videotapes. Potential materials for the cassette-recorded portfolio are speeches, musical performances, foreign-language pronunciation, group interaction skills, and demonstrations of laboratory techniques or psychomotor skills.

In 1986, the University of Kentucky established a consortium of 14 private liberal arts colleges in central Appalachia for the purpose of planning cooperative approaches to the assessment of general education. Senior interviews, considered the most valuable of a four-component program, took place in groups of three students, with a faculty member guiding a two-hour discussion. Students were given a chance to demonstrate generic skills through responses to such questions as "What is an educated person? What is the role of the artist in a culture? What were two or three of your most important college experiences?" Interviews on the 14 campuses were taped and then transcribed centrally and analyzed with a phenomenological/ethnographic approach.

Outcomes of Assessment

An encouraging outcome of the extensive activity that has taken place over the last decade in attempts to assess general education is that faculty are now engaged in more and better-informed discussions about the student experience in general education. This increase in conversation about student learning occurs even before faculty begin to collect evidence from students. Then, after the data begin to come in, faculty who are really invested in the project will see ways to improve the environment for learning. As a result of their involvement in general education assessment, faculty have learned that they must be more systematic in stating curriculum goals, in auditing the means of implementing the goals, and in collecting evidence that can be used to affirm or to suggest the need for modification of the original goals.

Jerry Gaff, perhaps the most persistent observer of developments in general education over the past two decades, has observed that assessment of general education outcomes has had a positive impact on the sense of identity and community within institutions that have approached assessment with seriousness of purpose. Involvement in assessment activities has also produced direction for faculty development and sparked faculty renewal. These changes, in turn, have been associated with improved student satisfaction and retention. Surely these are the most important outcomes that we could hope to associate with a successful assessment initiative.

Trudy W. Banta is a professor of education and director of the Center for Assessment Research and Development at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville. *A more comprehensive treatment of this topic will appear in a forthcoming issue of the* Journal of General Education.