

# ASSESSMENT OF GENERAL EDUCATION OUTCOMES

2000-2001

On August 21 and 22, 2001, a group of five faculty members and administrators participated in an evaluation of a sample of student productions voluntarily submitted by instructors teaching courses in three of seven general education areas in the university curriculum. This was the third consecutive year in which this outcomes assessment strategy was carried out. The participants in this year's exercise were Drs. Artley Edwards (Lecturer in Social Work), John Holm (Exec. Dir. of International Services and Programs and Prof. of Political Science), David Larson (Assoc. Prof. of English), Donald Ramos (Prof. and Chair of History), and William Shorrock (Vice Provost and Prof. of History). Dr. Jeffrey Ford (Assoc. Prof. of English) coordinated the exercise.

The members of the assessment group do not believe that their evaluation of student products yielded any information to support an assessment of the general education curriculum. They do believe that their activities served to identify the need for a different kind of assessment strategy.

The reports from the two previous assessment exercises identified a number of problems with the design of the assessment plan and with the nature of the samples collected for assessment.

1. **Congruence between curricular design and assessment strategy.** The design of the curriculum reflects the assumption that the goals in each of the areas will be achieved by the successful completion of a number of courses. However, the student products being assessed are produced in an individual course that may have been taken near the beginning or end of the student's fulfillment of the requirement.
2. **Uniformity within the sample.** In each of the two preceding years, the evaluation group recommended that, in requesting the submission of student work from faculty members, the kind of student production suitable for assessment be more fully specified. Last year's report recommended that faculty be asked to submit student essays of greater than 500 words and that faculty members be informed in advance of the criteria that would be used in assessing the submissions. As a result, this year's submissions were more consistently examples of student writing beyond a few sentences or a paragraph. In addition, the assignments that the students were responding to accompanied the essays in the majority of cases. It appears, however, that these specifications may have resulted in a smaller number of courses being represented in the sample since there is no stipulation that courses fulfilling these curricular requirements include a writing component of this kind. These observations, of course, have serious implications for the validity of the assessment strategy, and they are discussed below.

- 3. Consensus concerning criteria.** In each of the preceding two years the assessment group experienced difficulty in reaching agreement about evaluation criteria, especially for essays from courses in the areas of Nonwestern Culture and Civilization and Human Diversity and African-American Experience. This problem was particularly highlighted this year since the majority of essays received (32 out of 48) were from courses in Human Diversity and African-American Experience. The report from the summer 2000 assessment exercise included the following recommendation: "prior to the next evaluation, the criteria and characteristics for evaluation of work in the Nonwestern and Diversity/AA areas be reconsidered and more fully developed. This will probably entail reconsidering the goals of these curricular requirements and should probably involve participation of faculty teaching courses in these areas." The need for a review of the goals of the general education requirements, of the means for achieving these objectives, and of the criteria for assessing the curricular outcomes was reinforced by the most recent assessment exercise.

The evaluation exercise conducted in summer 2001 did not yield any useful information for assessing the effectiveness of the general education curricula in Western Culture and Civilization, Nonwestern Culture and Civilization, and Human Diversity and African-American Experience. The assessment group's work with the sample, however, did serve to raise some important questions about the current implementation of the general education requirements and to emphasize the need to develop new strategies for assessing outcomes of these requirements.

In response to the request to faculty members teaching courses in these three areas, a total of 48 student essays were received. The breakdown of the sample was as follows:

Western:	12 essays	3 courses	3 sections	3 instructors
Nonwestern:	4 essays	1 course	1 section	1 instructor
Diversity & AA exp.:	16 essays	4 courses	5 sections	4 instructors
Diversity	16 essays	2 courses	4 sections	2 instructors

This is a very small sample in view of the very large numbers of courses listed as fulfilling the requirements in these areas. The spring 2001 schedule lists approximately 120 courses under Western Culture and Civilization and approximately 50 under Human Diversity and African-American experience.

There is also little doubt that the sample is unrepresentative of the curriculum. The courses represented in the sample were those taught by instructors who voluntarily chose to respond to the request for submissions. Furthermore, not all instructors teaching courses in these areas were able to participate in the assessment since the request for submissions stipulated essays of 500 words or more. A writing requirement of this kind is not mandated for general education courses in these categories. We do not know what percentage of the designated courses do not include a writing assignment of this kind. We assume that a significant number do not, and we expect that many designated courses at the 100 and 200 levels, which have large enrollments, will not require such an essay. This

observation raises questions about the validity of assessing the effectiveness of these courses and the curriculum they constitute on the basis of students' performance on an extended essay.

Since there was only one course represented in the Nonwestern sample, the group excluded it from consideration. Of the remaining sample, 32 of the 44 essays (73%) were from courses in the area(s) of Human Diversity and African-American experience. The group encountered several problems in attempting to evaluate these essays and was unable to arrive at any meaningful assessment of the effectiveness of these courses or the curriculum.

This curricular area is peculiarly defined in that it can be regarded either as a single area (with a single set of goals and objectives) or as two separate areas (with different goals and objectives). It appears that all courses listed under African-American experience are also included under the Diversity listing. There are, in addition, courses that fulfill the Diversity requirement, but not the African-American experience requirement.

The group decided to split the sample into 1) Human Diversity and African-American Experience, and 2) Human Diversity, and to evaluate each group separately. The following evaluation criteria (slightly modified from last year) were adopted for each requirement:

#### AFRICAN-AMERICAN EXPERIENCE

- 1 – An ability to understand, assess, and analyze an important aspect of African-American history and culture or the African-American urban experience.
- 2 – An understanding of racism and its role in the experience of African-Americans.
- 3 – An ability to support a point of view with respect to the topic of the paper.

#### HUMAN DIVERSITY

- 1 – An ability to understand, assess, and analyze the culture, experiences, and contributions of groups within the U.S. that encounter bias on the basis of group identity.
- 2 – An ability to support a point of view with respect to the topic of the paper.

The readers scored the essays in each group on a three-point scale (as in previous years), as follows: 1= Below Expectations; 2=Meets Expectations; 3=Exceeds Expectations.

Of the sixteen essays in the first group (Human Diversity and African-American Experience) ten received all three scores from the readers and none of the essays received a unanimous scoring from the members of the group. This represents an extraordinary failure of consensus and it points to two kinds of interference: 1) the readers were not

employing the same evaluative criteria (or the same understanding of the criteria); 2) considerations beyond those identified in the criteria were influencing the evaluations.

The group's discussion following the evaluation highlighted aspects of the criteria and characteristics of the sample that verified these kinds of interference.

The essays from this group were from courses listed under both Human Diversity and African-American Experience, and the readers seemed unsure of whether (or how) the second set of criteria (those associated with the Human Diversity requirement) should bear on the evaluation. In particular, there seemed to be some uncertainty about the relationship between the second criterion under African-American Experience and the first under Human Diversity. Moreover, the criteria for the African-American Experience requirement contained a set of alternatives: 1) students were expected to demonstrate an understanding, etc. of "African-American history and culture" OR of the "African-American urban experience." It seemed that for some readers the distinction between these alternatives was not clear while for others it not only defined two distinctly different subjects, but also had considerable political significance. Finally, inasmuch as the objectives of these requirements seemed to entail a knowledge of and sensitivity to certain realities of American history and culture as well as an ability to analyze a topic and formulate a clear point of view, readers seemed uncertain about how to evaluate the absence of evidence of one of these or how to weight them in relation to each other.

In addition to these uncertainties about evaluation criteria, readers were influenced to varying degrees by an awareness of certain unacknowledged distinctions between the essays in the sample. Of the courses represented in this group, one was a 100-level course, two were 200-level courses, and one was a 300-level course. The readers were clearly aware both of differences in the nature of the assignments at these different levels and of different degrees of sophistication in students' performances. They were unsure about what weight, if any, to give to these differences. It is worth noting that the sample for Western Culture and Civilization also was derived from courses at all three levels, and those from the Human Diversity group represented 200- and 300-level courses.

The scoring of essays in the Human Diversity group was somewhat less heterogeneous. In this group, six out of the sixteen essays received all three scores from the readers, and one achieved unanimous agreement from the readers. In this group, the criteria were somewhat less complex, but the same extraneous issues were present.

### **Conclusions:**

The members of the evaluation group were convinced that there is a pressing need for an assessment of the general education requirements. They were also convinced that the present assessment strategy will not yield useful information and should not be continued at this time.

There is, in fact, no department or unit that takes responsibility for the general education curriculum, and given that it is defined only by the very large number of courses

approved for listing under each heading, it is difficult or impossible to formulate a clear view of what the curriculum is composed of or of how a particular course is related to the curricular objective with which it is associated. Once a course is approved for listing, it continues to be offered with varying syllabi, requirements, and instructors, and it is likely that, in many cases, the instructor teaching the course is unaware of the curricular objectives or even of the fact that her/his course is designated as fulfilling a general education requirement. There are no mechanisms for regular interaction among the faculty teaching courses that meet a general education requirement.

The assessment group believes that the first step toward an effective outcomes assessment strategy for the general education curriculum is a process that will foster discovery of the range of current understandings of the curriculum and pedagogical practices within the general education curriculum.

The group strongly recommends that every department that offers courses that meet a general education requirement be required to file copies of the syllabi for these courses each time they are offered.

The group further suggests that the annual assessment process for the next few years entail randomly selecting a certain number of courses from each curricular group for a review. Instructors in these courses would be asked to supplement the syllabus with a statement of their view of the relationship between the course and the curricular objectives, and the identification of an assignment or student activity within the course that they believe demonstrates a student's achievement of the course objectives. These selected courses would be reviewed by a faculty group each summer. The group would assess the student products from these courses and prepare a report on the relationship between the curricular objectives and the courses reviewed.

October 18, 2001