General Education Assessment Activity Report, 2010 – 2011

The 2008 five-year “Assessment Plan for General Education at UW-Madison” articulates the institution’s strategy for assessing student learning within the UW-Madison’s General Education Requirements. Despite the tumult of the 2010-11 academic year, we were able to make progress in assessing student learning. This year, UGER assessment efforts focused on the Ethnic Studies and Communication A requirements. As noted in our last report, this focus deviates from the cycle for assessment projects proposed in the 2008 plan. We attribute that deviation to delays encountered with projects that were more intellectually and logistically challenging than originally envisioned, as well as to the fact that several individuals who administer UGER also hold significant administrative responsibilities that competed for attention. Though the pace of these projects has slowed, we are trying to use this change in pace to reflect on what we are doing, and to apply what we learn to planning new projects. Despite these challenges, we continue to have a variety of assessment activities underway in different stages (pre-planning, study design, implementation, and analysis). Details are provided below.

Research Director: Professor and Director of Testing and Evaluation Services James Wollack has completed his first full year as the Research Director for General Education assessment. His leadership has been essential to our successes this year.

Other administrative support:

The College of Letters and Science provides Professor David Zimmerman (English) with support each summer to recognize his efforts as Communication Liaison for the campus. In this role, Professor Zimmerman consults with faculty about courses proposed to meet the Communication B requirement, advises faculty, staff, and students across campus concerning requests for exceptions, etc.

The College of Letters and Science provides the chair of the Ethnic Studies Subcommittee with support each summer to recognize that individual’s work in coordinating the subcommittee’s activities, to consult with instructors about their courses and aligning with the ESR course criteria, and to advise staff and students across campus about the ESR as it relates to requests for exceptions, transfer courses, policy development and interpretation, etc. Professor Louise Mares (Communication Arts) was the chair of the subcommittee in 2010-11; Professor Sissel Schroeder (Anthropology) will chair the subcommittee in 2011-12.

The College of Letters and Science provides Professor Mari-Beffa with support each summer to recognize her efforts as QR Liaison for the campus. Professor Mari-Beffa’s duties are similar to those of Professor Zimmerman, with the addition of consultation needed to plan our next stage of assessment for the QR-B requirement.

In addition, staff in the College of Letters and Science also support administration of the UGER program: Assistant Dean Elaine Klein serves as the Director of the program (a position formerly held by Senior Associate Dean Nancy Westphal-Johnson); Curricular Administration Specialist John Klatt and Joni Brown (Assistant to Dean Westphal-Johnson) provide essential program support.
**Assessment Projects, 2010-2011**

**Communication A:**

In partnership with the Center for the First-Year Experience and the instructors of Counseling Psychology 125, “A Wisconsin Experience Seminar,” Professor Wollack and the Comm A Subcommittee completed the research phase of a pilot study intended directly to assess student learning in Comm A. Professor Wollack is currently analyzing the data from this exercise. Those results will be discussed by the Subcommittee and UGEC in Fall 2011; a full report will be shared as soon as it is available.

In this study, all students enrolled in the seminar were asked to complete two writing tasks. Students who agreed to participate allowed their work to be submitted for further study. This seminar was selected, in part, because students enrolled were known to be in various categories of interest, including some who were exempt from Comm A, some who were required to take the course and who were currently enrolled in the course, and some who were required to take it and who were delaying enrollment until the following term. Identifying information was removed from the samples, and all materials were standardized (similar fonts, margins, pagination, etc.) Using a rubric developed by the Comm A Subcommittee, a group of seventeen raters evaluated the samples to quantify how well the students’ work aligned with learning outcomes associated with written communication goals in Comm A. The rating exercise was conducted over a two-day period that included: a training period led by session monitors/expert users to acclimate the group to using the rubric; calibration periods to ensure that raters were interpreting and applying criteria consistently; rapid data analysis so raters whose values were “consistently inconsistent” could be retrained; and a debriefing period in which raters were offered an opportunity to critique and refine the rubric, so it can be improved for future use. Finally, because all of the raters were graduate students, Dr. Klein led a discussion of “assessment fundamentals” to help prepare these “future faculty” for tasks they may someday be asked to perform.

This project represents the first attempt to directly examine students’ written communication with respect to learning outcomes articulated for the Communication A requirement. In addition, the pilot study was intended to serve as a “proof of concept” to examine whether the impact of one General Education course might be observed in student work undertaken for an unrelated course. Due to the small sample size, we suspect that this study will not lead directly to UGER Comm A policy changes; however, the coordination of logistics for this study has already informed projects that are currently in the planning stages.

**Ethnic Studies:**

As a result of previously convened assessment discussions with the faculty members who teach courses designated as meeting the Ethnic Studies Requirement (ESR), the Ethnic Studies Subcommittee worked with the L&S Teaching Assistant Resource Center to develop a “Lesson Share” project to help TAs teaching ESR courses. The project will provide opportunities for discussion about challenges particular to teaching ESR courses, as well as resources to guide TAs to effective teaching tools for ESR topics. This tool is ready to be shared with ESR
instructors, and the subcommittee and TARC hope that it will eventually support the ESR instructors’ aspiration to create a “community of practice” in Ethnic Studies teaching and learning.

The Ethnic Studies Subcommittee also planned an assessment project that will focus on evaluating student learning related to the broadly-stated goals for ESR courses. Founded on the results of structured discussions with faculty and staff in which ESR learning outcomes were identified, the committee has planned an ambitious three-pronged assessment strategy, which will (1) evaluate student learning with respect to content appropriate to ESR courses, by asking a panel of independent raters to evaluate artifacts of student learning (papers, projects, etc.) from those courses; (2) analyze and compare NSSE data on student attitudes toward diversity and climate issues; and (3) survey students about matters related to diversity and climate, comparing “pre-ESR” and “post-ESR” groups, and inviting them to reflect directly on the requirement. The Ethnic Studies Subcommittee has invited discussion of this project with the faculty and staff who teach ESR-designated courses; in 2011-12, these conversations will continue while the projects get under way and as the rubric used to evaluate the ESR learning outcomes is vetted by the instructors.

General Breadth (Arts and Humanities, Natural Science, Social Science):

As noted in previous reports, efforts to identify learning outcomes for “general breadth” areas have been stymied by the historical lack of clarity in definitions for learning outcomes for the various areas of breadth. In 2010-2011, the UGEC advised that we focus on one area of breadth (rather than all three) and pursue discussions with faculty and staff in that area, asking them to consider what breadth contributes to learning for non-specialists. Building on the successful “Year of the Humanities” and “Year of the Arts”, we will focus our attention on that area.

Quantitative Reasoning B:

Unfortunately, plans to evaluate students’ QRB learning in “non-computational” QR-B courses were placed on hold due to limited staff time and attention during the tumultuous 2010-11 academic year. That delay, however, has allowed us an opportunity to regroup and revise our approach, and in 2011-12, Professor Mari-Beffa will convene a committee of faculty members who teach these courses and work with them identify a strategy for evaluating how well students achieve broad QR-B learning outcomes.

Policy considerations related to assessment activity:

Completion of QRA before QRB: When the General Education Requirements were first approved, they included a policy that was not technically feasible and could not be implemented. Changes in the course enrollment and student information systems now allow us to implement this policy, which holds that students must satisfy the Quantitative Reasoning-A requirement before they enroll in a course approved to meet the Quantitative Reasoning-B requirement. After consultation with departments offering QR-B courses and with Curricular Services, this
requirement was implemented for the Fall 2009 enrollment cycle. Since our last report on this matter, Curricular Services and advising staff monitored registration patterns for Spring 2010, Fall 2011, and Spring 2011; no issues were reported.

**Sequencing Comm A and Comm B.** Consideration of the requirement that QR-A be completed before QR-B raised questions about similarly sequencing the Communication A and B requirements. In the absence of a recommendation to that effect when the recommendations were approved, the UGEC sought information as to whether lack of sequencing has a deleterious effect on students.

A study was conducted by Clare Huhn of Academic Planning and Analysis to determine (a) the prevalence of students taking these courses “out of sequence”, and (b) if taking courses “out of sequence” is detrimental to students. The study found that very few students (2.1% of the cohorts studied) take these courses “out of sequence”. Though the comparative analysis of “out of sequence” vs. “in sequence” student performance was limited by the few students who do this, as well as by the small number of courses with enrollments large enough to make comparisons, it appears that taking the courses out of sequence is not detrimental to students.

The APA study also investigated the consequences of the many ways in which Comm A can be satisfied other than by taking a Comm A course at UW-Madison (Advanced Placement, International Baccalaurate, performance on the UW English Placement Test, transfer credit). Since a growing proportion of students satisfy the requirement via these alternatives, the UGEC asked if these alternatives have a deleterious effect on students. The study looked at student grades in Comm B courses in light of how they satisfied Comm A, and found no variation among students earning D/F grades, and only minor variation among students earning A/AB. These results suggest that allowing credit by examination and transfer is not disadvantageous to students when viewed from this fairly narrow perspective.

The UGEC concluded that it would not be a good use of faculty or staff time to work with departments to set and implement a Comm A prerequisite for the more than 200 courses that satisfy the Comm B requirement; however, individual departments may set “satisfaction of Comm A” as a prerequisite for individual courses for which it is appropriate, if they wish to do so. In light of the other curricular objectives of Comm A (e.g., to teach oral communication and introduce students to information literacy at UW-Madison), the UGEC advised that efforts continue to be made to inform instructors about oral communication and the online library user education resources.

**Ethnic Studies and Pass/Fail Policy Discussion.** The Ethnic Studies Subcommittee has engaged the faculty and staff who teach ESR courses in several discussions about student learning outcomes in ESR courses. When participants expressed concern that some students had been meeting the requirement with courses undertaken on a “Pass/Fail” basis, the UGEC sought an analysis of Degree Audit Reports and confirmed that students in a particular program were meeting the requirement in this way. The UGEC endorsed the principle that fundamental degree requirements should not be met with courses taken on a “Pass/Fail” basis, and discussions ensued across the Council of Associate Deans and within schools and colleges to confirm that
there is substantial alignment on this point. After this principle was adopted by all undergraduate schools and colleges, the University Academic Planning Council approved the UGEC recommendation to implement a campus-wide policy that only courses taken on a graded basis may be used to satisfy the General Education Requirements (Quantitative Reasoning, Communications, and Ethnic Studies requirements), effective Fall 2012.

Communication about University General Education:

- Materials related to the administration of the UGER are available online, through the General Education Requirements website (http://www.ls.wisc.edu/gened/). Conversion of that site to the UW-Madison’s WiscWeb CMS from standard HTML continues to prove useful. The site is easier to navigate and to administer, allowing for timely updates. The next major improvement will involve applying new templates on the site, to conform to the new university brand and visual identity guidelines.

- Each semester, memoranda are sent to departments that offer courses that meet Comm B, QRB, and ESR courses. Information about course criteria, including learning outcomes, is included with those memos. In Summer 2011, in response to feedback received from instructors about these communications, additional efforts were made to send these reminders directly to the course instructors. The memos were also revised to encourage instructors to include information about learning outcomes in their course materials.

Dissemination of Information on Assessment Projects and Student Learning:

- The UGEC again served as the UW-Madison committee sponsors for the annual UW System Liberal Education and America’s Promise scholarship competition. Once again, a UW-Madison student received high honors, placing third in the competition, and we congratulate Emma Svenson for her essay, “Spanish, Shakespeare and Statistics: The Pathway to a Physician’s Career”.

- UW-Madison faculty and staff were featured in a Lumina Foundation Focus article, “New ways to measure student learning: better tools for assessment are key in ensuring quality” (Winter 2011). The article highlights the efforts we make to connect the UGER to the overall Wisconsin Experience in a way that is consistent with institutional processes and values, and by doing so, to gather information that can be used to verify and improve student learning.

For questions or comments about this report, please contact Assistant Dean Elaine M. Klein (emklein@ls.wisc.edu).

UGEC Assess Activity Report 2010-2011.doc
Final: 18 August 2011