

COMMON CURRICULUM PROGRAM ASSESSMENT

[Adopted by the General Education Board on 15 July 2013]

I. BACKGROUND

Our accrediting agency, the Middle States Commission on Higher Education, requires assessment of general education programs. It is a condition of our accreditation supported by the college administration. In response to the academic reorganization (including creation of the new position of Director of General Education), bringing General Education into alignment with the new Union Education framework, and intractable problems associated with provisional assessment plans drawn up for the then-part B of Gen Ed and the absence of any assessment plan for Clusters, the AAC charged the Gen Ed Board and Director of General Education in November 2011 to develop a new assessment plan for the Common Curriculum (General Education) based on broad programmatic learning outcomes in place of existing or planned assessment for the program. (FYP and SRS were specifically exempted for already having established assessment processes.)

Middle States requires that assessment be a) useful, b) cost-effective, c) reasonably accurate and truthful, d) planned, and e) organized, systematized, and sustained. The logical outcome of the previous assessment plan for Gen Ed failed both a. and b. Fully implemented, it would have resulted in many hundreds of individual student assessments each term. In many cases individual instructors would have been responsible for developing their own assessment instruments and conducting dozens of individual students assessments in a term. Further, no faculty member, department, or Gen Ed Board could possibly process cumulatively thousands of reports to produce useful information about the program and our students' learning. That most departments do not report on Common Curriculum assessment in their annual reports, despite nominally being expected to do so, testifies to the multiple problems of the previous approaches. Based on the evidence of a mock sample of students no such burden will fall on instructors under our proposed new assessment and we will meet all of the Middle States requirements, especially a. and b.

Beginning in May 2012, the Gen Ed Board determined to take a very different approach. Above all we went back to the simple principle that the general education program embodies the essential foundations for a Liberal Arts education. It should express what we value most about the Liberal Arts: critical thinking and analytical reasoning, creativity, and reflective learning as developed through the breadth of intellectual traditions and disciplines represented in the Liberal Arts. We concluded that the Common Curriculum learning outcomes should therefore focus on these critical values and purposes. We chose to create an assessment that went beyond a grab bag of individual distribution requirements unconnected to one another and without any kind of broad perspective informing them.

From those principles, we concluded that targeted assessment by portfolio makes the most sense. It allows us to select a small but useful sample of students in each entering class.

Through portfolios that focus on broad learning outcomes in each of the courses students complete in the program, we can see and evaluate the impact of the Common Curriculum on real students over their academic careers and use the findings as the basis to evaluate the program and strive for its improvement. This plan replaces all current Common Curriculum assessment except existing assessment programs for FYP and SRS; both will remain unchanged.

II. COMMON CURRICULUM LEARNING OUTCOMES

II.A. PREMISE

The premise for these learning outcomes lies in the *Union Education* framework (in which the Common Curriculum is embedded)¹ and the recent study of the Liberal Arts by Professor Mark Roche at the University of Notre Dame. In his book *Why Choose the Liberal Arts?*, Roche identifies three complementary and conjoined purposes of a Liberal Arts education:

- 1) The **practical value** of critical thinking and communication skills learned by studying the Liberal Arts that can be applied beyond college or university education.
- 2) The **intrinsic worth** of the Liberal Arts disciplines and intellectual experiences gained by studying broadly in them.
- 3) The **idealist purpose** of the Liberal Arts in that they encourage, even demand, that one ask big, meaningful questions in the course of becoming someone who lives a reflective life.

II.B. LEARNING OUTCOMES

Through the Common Curriculum, students will develop the breadth of knowledge and flexibility of mind needed to participate in meaningful academic, community, and global conversations informed by the Liberal Arts. They will do so by achieving these learning outcomes:

- A. **Communicate Critical and Analytical Thinking.** Students will examine, evaluate, and apply problem-solving techniques to evidence, data, artifacts, arguments, and theories according to the diverse analytical traditions of the Liberal Arts; students will communicate clearly and correctly the results of such analysis.
- B. **Make Original Connections or Contributions.** Students will make original connections or contributions to academic, community, or global questions through their writings, theories, designs, objects of art, or other innovative projects.
- C. **Reflect on Their Learning.** Students will demonstrate the ability to link their experiences in the Common Curriculum with their intellectual development as lifelong learners.

¹ <http://www.union.edu/academic/index.php>

II.C. EXPLANATION

The Common Curriculum learning outcomes embody the practical value, intrinsic worth, and idealistic purposes of the Common Curriculum (FYP, SRS, HUL, QMR, SCLB, HUM, SOCS, SET, LCC) as the foundation of a Liberal Arts education at Union.

- **Learning outcome A** emphasizes the need to learn and practice critical thinking in the breadth of disciplines and analytical traditions in the Liberal Arts. Instructors will assess student learning in this outcome by evaluating a sample of assignments for the effective communication of the results of the student's critical inquiry.
- **Learning outcome B** emphasizes the importance of deliberately connecting students' coursework with central academic questions in the respective disciplines and analytical traditions of the Liberal Arts, but also in pushing students to engage with questions and endeavors to be found more broadly in academia and in their communities and the wider world. Instructors will assess student learning in this outcome by evaluating a representative sample of assignments for such connections and contributions.
- **Learning outcome C** may be viewed as asking the students to draw together the practical and intrinsic value of the Liberal Arts with its idealistic purposes as they relate to being a life-long learner and, perhaps, asking big questions. Outcome C will be assessed indirectly as explained in section IV.

III. COMMON CURRICULUM CONTENT REQUIREMENTS

III.A. EXPLANATION

Previous assessment processes, such as they were, essentially assessed whether, say, a literature course was really teaching literature through micro-level assessment using five or six different learning outcomes. The same was true for all of the requirements in the Common Curriculum, creating a situation in which hundreds and hundreds of students had to be assessed across fifty or sixty individual learning outcomes in many dozens of courses. Collectively, faculty faced a situation where they would have been asked to produce thousands of individual assessments across the vast majority of courses producing a mountain of indigestible data for its own sake. That approach fails the expectations of Middle States regarding usability and cost-effectiveness.

We rejected such an approach in favour of assessing common outcomes built around the essential purposes of the program expressed through the breadth of analytical traditions in the Liberal Arts. Courses have been and will continue to be approved for inclusion in the Common Curriculum during the ordinary course proposal process. The instructor must satisfactorily explain both 1) how Common Learning Outcomes will be embedded in the course and 2) how the course meets some or all of the Category Content Requirements. Assessment will address the program-wide Common Learning Outcomes, not category content requirements that must be met up-front for course approval.

III.B. CATEGORY CONTENT REQUIREMENTS

The following content requirements must be met before a course will be approved for Common Curriculum credit. They are adapted from draft learning outcomes developed between 2006 and 2011 (that can be found in the Program Archive portion of the Common Curriculum website).

LITERATURE (HUL) Content Requirements

A Literature course will provide instruction and guidance through which students:

- Read critically some of the important works and modes of world literature; works of literature are narrowly defined here to mean traditional written texts such as books, essays, pamphlets, or the like.
- Interpret literature through specific knowledge of literary traditions, literary devices, and critical approaches.

QUANTITATIVE AND MATHEMATICAL REASONING (QMR) Content Requirements

A Quantitative and Mathematical Reasoning course will provide instruction and guidance through which students:

- Comprehend problems and express solutions using the language of mathematics, quantitative reasoning, and problem solving that requires rigorous logical demonstrations with multiple steps.
- Make use of symbolic and abstract representations and adapt non-trivial algorithms.

NATURAL SCIENCES WITH LAB (SCLB) Content Requirements

A Natural Sciences with Lab course will provide instruction and guidance through which students:

- Understand how science and the scientific method work.
- Comprehend the difference between a hypothesis and a theory, how data are interpreted, and how hypotheses are formed.

HUMANITIES (HUM) Content Requirements

A Humanities course will provide instruction and guidance through which students:

- Understand literary or philosophical texts and traditions and works and styles of art.
- Comprehend meaningful contexts, credible interpretations, and the pursuit of questions arising from the act of interpretation for such works.

SOCIAL SCIENCES (SOCS) Content Requirements

A Social Science course will provide instruction and guidance through which students:

- Analyze the human experience (the behavior of and interactions among individuals, groups, institutions, societies, or the natural environment) past and present.
- Develop an understanding of theories, concepts, methods, and ethical practices characteristic of particular disciplines in the social sciences.

SCIENCE, ENGINEERING, AND TECHNOLOGY Content Requirements

A Science, Engineering, and Technology course will provide instruction and guidance through which students:

- Develop an understanding of how foundational principles and methodologies in science, engineering, or technology are used to analyze and manipulate the natural and physical world.
- Evaluate evidence, results, and claims related to the impact of science, engineering, or technology on broader human or societal issues.

LINGUISTIC AND CULTURAL COMPETENCY (LCC) Content Requirements

A Linguistic and Cultural Competency course, its equivalent in advanced foreign-language training, or greater familiarity with cultures gained through lived experiences will provide instruction and guidance through which students:

- Acquire a conscious recognition of cultural diversity and complexity within an understanding of our shared humanity
- Better enable students to act across cultural boundaries as citizens of a global community.

IV. ASSESSMENT PROCESS

IV.A. OVERVIEW

We will assess the Common Curriculum by compiling portfolios containing direct and indirect evidence of student learning. The elected members of the General Education Board and the Director of General Education will evaluate portfolios at the end of the junior year for each academic class. Direct evidence will consist of 1) existing FYP and SRS assessments and 2) assessments by instructors of student learning in other courses that fulfil the requirements of the Common Curriculum. Indirect evidence will consist of 1) a reflective essay written by students prior to 2) an interview with the General Education Board during the senior year.

IV.B. SAMPLING

- A stratified random sample of incoming first-year students will be made such that thirty students in an academic class are evaluated. We will begin with ‘generic’ samples, but it will be possible to use alternate-year samples to create particular sets of students.
- Steps will be taken to tailor the sample so that the burden on faculty is spread as evenly as possible across high-enrolling Common Curriculum courses such as FYP, introductory English courses, or the like. The Gen Ed Board studied the practical burden of the system on individual faculty based on a mock sample using the actual courses taken by students in the class of 2013. Across all the students and courses in that sample, we calculated that 101 instructors would be asked to complete only one IAR, seventeen instructors would be asked to complete two, four to complete three, and only one to complete four.
- Students selected for the assessment sample (AS) and their academic advisers will be notified at the start of the academic year. Students in the AS will be scheduled to attend an information session with the Director of General Education. Students will receive complete written information and verbal explanation of the assessment process and their role in the AS. Advisers should follow-up with these students during subsequent advising sessions.
- Student Confidentiality and Consent. Students will be assigned an AS number in order to protect their identity. Only the Director of General Education, Program Assistant, faculty adviser, and individual faculty members who conduct assessments will know the identity of students who are part of the AS. For all other assessment purposes, including assessment reporting, the members of the AS will be known only by their AS

numbers. It is permissible under federal guidelines to collect data for the sole purpose of improving instructional programs, but we will practice appropriate informed consent when working with students in the process.

IV.C. PORTFOLIOS

- The Director of General Education and Program Assistant will compile and archive portfolios as part of ordinary program administration.
- Portfolios will contain the following items:
 - 1) Basic information on the student identified by the AS number and the academic class profile.
 - 2) Copies of the current FYP and SRS student assessment for students in the sample.
 - 3) An instructor-completed individual assessment report (IAR) for each Common Curriculum requirement consisting of HUL, QMR, SCLB, HUM, SOCS, SET, LCC.
 - 4) A student reflective essay (SRE) of between one and two pages single-spaced submitted during fall term of the senior year, in advance of an interview with portfolio evaluators (PE) in winter term of the senior year.

IV.D. PORTFOLIO SUBMISSIONS

- **PLEASE NOTE:** FYP and SRS instructors **do not** complete the individual assessment report (IAR). Instead please submit a copy of the standard FYP or SRS assessment form for any student in the assessment sample in your course.
- The Individual assessment report (IAR) and student reflective essay SRE student reflective essay will be accessed through the Common Curriculum webapps.
- After registration closes in a given term, faculty with AS students will be notified by the Director of General Education of the presence of such students in their classes for whom an IAR must be submitted.
- The IAR will assess learning outcomes A and B. Instructors will complete and submit the IAR via a single integrated webapp. The webapp will make this a one-stop process. Instructors will complete the IAR form according to the prompts and instructions on the screen as well as attach and submit copies of the course syllabus, relevant assignments, and student work as needed/indicated. ***IARs must be submitted no later than two weeks from the deadline for final term grades.***
- The SRE will assess learning outcome C. Students will complete and submit the SRE via a single integrated webapp following the prompts and instructions on the screen. The SRE will prompt students to explain connections between courses and experiences in the Common Curriculum and their intellectual development as lifelong learners. ***SREs must be submitted no later than the end of the fall term of the senior year.***

IV.E. EVALUTING and REPORTING on PORTFOLIOS

- The portfolio evaluators (PE) will consist of the elected faculty members of the General Education Board and the Director of General Education.
- **Reading Portfolios.** PEs will evaluate student portfolios upon completion of the junior year, typically during the summer break. PEs will be paid a stipend for evaluating the portfolios and participating in the completion of a summary assessment report. It is expected that the process leading to an assessment report will not require more than

one week. PEs will read and evaluate entire portfolios irrespective of the individual PEs' particular disciplinary expertise.

- **Student Reflective Essays and Interviews.** SREs will be added to student portfolios upon receipt at the end of the fall term of the senior year. PEs will evaluate each SRE. Students will be interviewed during the winter term of the senior year. PEs will make a conscious effort to explore responses in the SREs and make direct connections to Learning Outcomes A, B, and C. PEs will develop a set of standard questions to this end as the assessment process is phased in.
- **Summary Evaluation and Analysis.** The responsibility of PEs is not to duplicate or double-check the work of faculty in the IARs or evaluate individual faculty or courses. The primary responsibility of PEs is to take a 'big picture' view of student learning in the Common Curriculum with a view to affirming current practice or making recommendations for program-scale improvements. These might range from revisions to content requirements or review of learning outcomes A, B, or C and the assessment process itself to significant changes in particular requirements, elimination of others, or addition of new ones.
- **Assessment Report.** It is expected that much of the evaluation process will take place in discussion between PEs after 1) reading portfolios and 2) completing student interviews. It will be desirable/necessary to minute these meetings. It is expected that the Assessment Report will include some tabulation of proficiencies in learning outcomes in the AS (see example below), but the report will be primarily a narrative of the PEs analysis, evaluation, and recommendations. It will be the responsibility of the Director of General Education to draw together the comments and discussion in drafting an assessment report. PEs will be free to submit written comments or responses as part of compiling the assessment report.
- **Closing the Loop.** The annual Common Curriculum assessment report will be posted to the *Teaching the Common Curriculum Nexus* site (open to all faculty) and submitted to the Director of Assessment. As Mary J Allen writes, 'If the assessment demonstrates that students are mastering the outcome at appropriate levels, you and your colleagues can celebrate. If some aspects of the results are disappointing, change is called for.' (Allen, *Assessing General Education Programs*, 19) In other words, assessment should not be premised on seeking out problems that require changes. If it isn't broke, we won't feel compelled to fix it. The primary goals of this assessment are to promote 1) curricular innovation in the Common Curriculum and 2) pedagogical and faculty development. We would hope that the assessment report and information about particular requirements as experienced by real students could provide an opportunity for faculty to reflect on the program or their own teaching within it. We would hope that participation by faculty and students in the IAR and SREs will prompt self-reflection and innovation. We will use FYP, SRS, and COT workshops, among other venues, as opportunities to encourage that process.
- **Alumni Follow-up.** Beginning in 2014-2015, we will develop a small set of questions for the four- and nine-year surveys of alumni conducted by the college to evaluate the long-term, lasting impact of courses in the Common Curriculum.

IV.F. PHASE-IN

- When fully phased in, the PEs will evaluate the sample from each graduating class at the end of its junior year and conduct interviews with students in the AS in the senior year. However, with the three-year lead-time required, that would mean not conducting the first Common Curriculum assessment until Summer 2016. Besides being an undesirable and impractical delay, this would pose problems for the mid-term accreditation report for Middle States. The phase-in is intended to provide sufficient information until a graduating class can be evaluated in its entirety on the ordinary schedule.
- PEs will evaluate the class of 2017 portfolios each year as they are assembled until the junior year. The ordinary schedule will be followed beginning with the classes of 2018 and 2019. The schedule is as follows:

CLASS	Summer 2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019
2017	READ	READ	READ	Interview		
2018		XXX	XXX	READ	Interview	
2019			XXX	XXX	READ	Interview