

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 student 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.