

COMMON CURRICULUM PROGRAM ASSESSMENT

[Adopted by the General Education Board on 15 July 2013
Revised May 2015; March 2016]

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 the common learning outcomes lies in the Union Education framework, the recent study of the Liberal Arts by Professor Mark Roche at the University of Notre Dame, and Union College president Stephen Ainlay's concept of 'think, connect, act.' Roche identified three complementary purposes of a Liberal Arts education: 1) the **practical value** of critical thinking and communication skills 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 **idealistic purpose** of the Liberal Arts in that they encourage, even demand, that one ask meaningful questions in the course of becoming someone who lives a reflective life.

II.B. LEARNING OUTCOMES

Through the Common Curriculum, Union students will develop the breadth of knowledge and flexibility of mind needed to participate in meaningful conversations relevant to particular disciplines, the Academy, local society, or the global community. They will do so by achieving these learning outcomes across the breadth of Liberal Arts represented in the Common Curriculum requirements:

- A. **Communicate Critical and Analytical Thinking.** *Students will examine, evaluate, and apply problem-solving techniques to evidence, data, objects, artefacts, arguments, and theories according to the diverse analytical traditions of the Liberal Arts; students will communicate clearly and correctly the results of such analysis.* **Explanation:** this learning outcome emphasizes the need to learn and practice critical thinking in the breadth of disciplines and analytical traditions in the Liberal Arts. Instructors assess student learning in this outcome by evaluating a representative sample of assignments for the effective communication of the results of the student's critical inquiry.

- B. **Make Connections or Original Contributions.** *Through their writings, theories, problems, designs, objects of art, and other projects students will make connections or original contributions to questions and concerns relevant to a particular discipline, the Academy, local society, or the global community.* **Explanation:** this learning outcome emphasizes the importance of deliberately using students' coursework to engage issues, debates, schools of thought, and the like relevant to particular disciplines as well as the Academy, local society, or the global community. Instructors assess student learning in this outcome by evaluating a representative sample of assignments for such connections.

- 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.* **Explanation:** this learning outcome may be viewed as asking the students to draw

together the practical, intrinsic, and idealistic value of the Liberal Arts as they relate to being a life-long learner and, perhaps, asking those big questions. The Gen Ed Board assesses learning outcome C indirectly through a student reflective response and student interview; instructors provide direct assessment of this learning outcome **if** it is observed in their classes.

II.C. ADDITIONAL FYP/FYP-H LEARNING OUTCOMES

First-Year Preceptorial (FYP) and Honors Preceptorial (FYP-H) have more specific learning outcomes under Learning Outcome A, as follows:

- A1. Discusses ideas:** critically and respectfully engages in dialogue with others about ideas in texts as well as those expressed in class.
- A2. Reads texts critically:** shows an understanding of/ability to evaluate complex and sophisticated ideas from multiple and diverse perspectives.
- A3. Develops effective arguments:**
 - A3a.** Supports a focused thesis, including analysis of evidence to support conclusions.
 - A3b.** Organizes information logically and clearly in essays that guide readers through the text
 - A3c.** Expresses ideas clearly and appropriately, with few, if any, grammar, usage, and spelling errors
 - A3d.** Integrates evidence into one's own argument (e.g., uses quotations appropriately, correct citation, etc.).
- A4. Incorporates revision** into the writing process as a means of improving critical thinking and the expression of ideas.

II.D. ADDITIONAL SRS/SCH LEARNING OUTCOMES

The Sophomore Seminar (SRS) and Scholars Research Seminar (SCH) have more specific learning outcomes under Learning Outcome A, as follows:

- A1. DEVELOP A RESEARCH TOPIC:** Formulate a clear, focused research question or thesis appropriate to the topic of inquiry.
- A2. FIND EVIDENCE:** Identify and locate evidence appropriate for examining a research question or thesis.
- A3. EVALUATE EVIDENCE:** Critically and ethically analyze evidence obtained for examination of a research question or thesis.
- A4. DEVELOP AN EVIDENCE-BASED ARGUMENT:** Develop and organize a logical argument grounded in the analysis of evidence that supports or refutes a research question or thesis.
- A5. PRESENT RESEARCH FINDINGS:** Present a logical analytical argument supported by evidence in an appropriate written form without errors of grammar, usage, and spelling.
- A6. PRACTICE PROFESSIONAL STANDARDS OF CITATION:** Incorporate and cite evidence in a manner that meets the professional standards of the discipline most appropriate for the topic of inquiry.

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).

FIRST-YEAR PRECEPTORIAL (FYP) / HONORS PRECEPTORIAL (FYP-H) Content Requirements

FYP and FYP-H will provide instruction and guidance through which students achieve the learning outcomes specified under sections IIB and IIC above. Content developed by individual instructors will reflect the mission statement for FYP/FYP-H, which reads: Through reading, writing and discussing important ideas from diverse perspectives, students develop an appreciation for the values embodied in the liberal arts. These include the habits and skills of critical inquiry, a tolerance for diverse points of view, an awareness of ambiguity, and a deep curiosity about the social, ethical, cultural, political and natural world in which we live. All of this takes place in an environment that cultivates skills in analytical reading, clear and vigorous writing, and convincing argumentation. More specific guidelines on content are:

- a) Faculty will organize the course and select content around general themes. Themes are both broad and flexible: Dialogue and Diversity, The Outsider, Freedom and Oppression, etc. The current themes are Nature and Culture and Ways of Knowing.
- b) Faculty should emphasize gender, cultural diversity, and inter-disciplinarity in the course content. Sections should not be considered as 'departmental seminars' focusing on one discipline.
- c) Writing is to be a significant element in FYP. Students are expected to complete frequent writing assignments that receive written faculty response. The nature of the assignments may vary depending on the instructor. They could take the form, for example, of

expository essays, creative writings, response journals, micro-themes, etc. At least two of these assignments should be substantial in nature, involving revisions and individual meetings between the faculty member and the student. Some Precept instructors ask their students to buy a handbook or style guide.

- d) The development of critical thinking and critical reading skills is to be a significant element of FYP.
- e) Speaking, whether through participation in discussion, debates, formal presentations, or the use of student discussion leaders, should also be an important part of the course.

SOPHOMORE RESEARCH SEMINAR (SRS) / SCHOLARS RESEARCH SEMINAR (SCH)

SRS and SCH will provide instruction and guidance through which students achieve the learning outcomes specified under sections IIB and IID above. Content developed by individual instructors will reflect the mission goals for the course, stated as:

- a) Contribute (with the other parts of the Common Curriculum) to exposing students to the breadth of human knowledge.
- b) Give all students one early experience in thinking like a researcher before or alongside their major program of study. Thinking like a researcher in SRS/SCH means taking the raw materials of any subject or topic, analyzing them critically and creatively, and developing a reasoned argument or theory grounded in evidence.
- c) Conduct research in a field that may not be the students' own using unfamiliar methods.
- d) Find the best way to present original research in a coherent, persuasive, and pleasing form, typically in the form of a 12-18 page research paper.

LITERATURE (HUL) Content Requirements

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

- a) Read and interpret primary written works of Literature throughout the course, with or without secondary studies and analyses.
- b) For purposes of this requirement, Literature is defined exclusively as short- and long-form written works of prose and/or verse.

QUANTITATIVE AND MATHEMATICAL REASONING (QMR) Content Requirements

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

- a) Comprehend problems and express solutions using the language of mathematics, quantitative reasoning, and problem solving that requires rigorous logical demonstrations with multiple steps.
- b) 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:

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

ARTS AND HUMANITIES (HUM) Content Requirements

Arts and Humanities courses will provide instruction and guidance through which students:

- a) Understand literary or philosophical texts and traditions and works and styles of art.
- b) 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:

- a) Analyze the human experience (the behavior of and interactions among individuals, groups, institutions, societies, or the natural environment) past and present.
- b) 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:

- a) 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.
- b) Evaluate evidence, results, and claims related to the impact of science, engineering, or technology on broader human or societal issues.

LANGUAGES AND CULTURES (LCC) Content Requirements

Languages and Cultures courses, advanced foreign-language training, or dedicated coursework and experiential learning abroad will provide instruction and guidance through which students:

- a) Learn and demonstrate methodologically- and disciplinary-grounded approaches to the study and analysis of cultural diversity and complexity
- b) Acquire a conscious and respectful recognition of cultural diversity and complexity within an understanding of our shared humanity.
- c) Be enabled and empowered as citizens of a global community to act across cultural boundaries justly, disinterestedly, and on the basis of human equality.

IV. ASSESSMENT PROCESS

IV.A. OVERVIEW

We 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 evaluate portfolios at the end of the junior year for each academic class. Direct evidence consists of 1) 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 consists of 1) a reflective response written by students prior to 2) an interview with the General Education Board during the senior year.

IV.B. SAMPLING

- The Director of General Education creates a stratified random sample of incoming first-year students such that thirty students in an academic class are evaluated. Typically, samples will be generic, but it will be possible to use alternate-year samples to focus on particular subsets of Union students.
- Steps are 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 are notified at the start of the academic year. Students in the AS are scheduled to attend an information session with the Director of General Education. Students receive complete written information and verbal explanation of the assessment process and their role in the AS. Advisers (ideally) follow-up with these students during subsequent advising sessions.
- Student Confidentiality and Consent. Students are 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 know the identity of students who are part of the AS. For all other assessment purposes, including assessment reporting, the members of the AS are 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 practice appropriate informed consent when working with students in the process.

IV.C. PORTFOLIOS

- The Director of General Education and Program Assistant 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) An instructor-completed individual assessment report (IAR) for FYP/FYP-H and SRS/SCH, using a specially designed assessment form for each.

- 3) An instructor-completed individual assessment report (IAR) for each of the other Common Curriculum requirements consisting of HUL, QMR, SCLB, HUM, SOCS, SET, LCC, using a common assessment form.
- 4) A student reflective response (SRR) evaluating the CC and making suggestions for improvements submitted during fall term of the senior year, in advance of an interview with portfolio evaluators (PE) in spring term of the senior year.

IV.D. PORTFOLIO SUBMISSIONS

- The individual assessment reports (IARs) for FYP/FYP-H, SRS/SCH, and the other Common Curriculum requirements are accessed and submitted through the Common Curriculum webapps.
- The student reflective response SRR are accessed and submitted through the Common Curriculum webapps.
- After registration closes in a given term, faculty with AS students are 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 assesses learning outcomes A, B, and C. Instructors complete and submit the IAR via a single integrated webapp. The webapp will make this a one-stop process. Instructors 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 SRR assesses learning outcome C. Beginning in 2017-2018, students complete and submit the SRR via a single integrated webapp following the prompts and instructions on the screen. The SRR prompts students to explain connections between courses and experiences in the Common Curriculum and their intellectual development as lifelong learners. ***SRRs 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) consist of the elected faculty members of the General Education Board and the Director of General Education.
- **Reading Portfolios.** PEs evaluate student portfolios upon completion of the junior year, typically during the summer break. PEs are 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 read and evaluate entire portfolios irrespective of the individual PEs' particular disciplinary expertise.
- **Student Reflective Responses and Interviews.** SRSs are added to student portfolios upon receipt at the end of the fall term of the senior year. PEs evaluate each SRR. Students will be interviewed during the spring term of the senior year beginning in 2017-2018. PEs will make a conscious effort to explore responses in the SRRs 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.** Much of the evaluation process takes place in discussion between PEs after 1) reading portfolios and 2) completing student interviews. 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 is primarily a narrative of the PEs analysis, evaluation, and recommendations. It is the responsibility of the Director of General Education to draw together the comments and discussion in drafting an assessment report. PEs are free to submit written comments or responses as part of compiling the assessment report.
- **Closing the Loop.** The annual Common Curriculum assessment report is 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 argue that the assessment report and information about particular requirements as experienced by real students provides an opportunity for faculty to reflect on the program or their own teaching within it. The act of completing an IAR can have the same effect at the level of individual instructors. In other words, we expect that participation by faculty and students in the IAR and SRRs will prompt self-reflection and innovation. We use FYP, SRS, and COT workshops, among other venues, as opportunities to encourage that process.
- **Alumni Follow-up.** Beginning in 2016-2017, the Gen Ed Board 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.