

COMMON CURRICULUM ASSESSMENT ANNUAL REPORT 2014-2015

[Submitted to the Director of Assessment by Professor John Cramsie, Director of General Education, 25 August 2015]

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I. COMMON CURRICULUM 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 essay and student interview; instructors provide direct assessment of this learning outcome **if** it is observed in their classes.

ADDITIONAL FYP/FYP-H LEARNING OUTCOMES for Learning Outcome A

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

- A1. DISCUSS IDEAS:** critically and respectfully engages in dialogue with others about ideas in texts as well as those expressed in class.
- A2. READ TEXTS CRITICALLY:** shows an understanding of/ability to evaluate complex and sophisticated ideas from multiple and diverse perspectives.
- A3. DEVELOP 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. INCORPORATE REVISION** into the writing process as a means of improving critical thinking and the expression of ideas.

ADDITIONAL SRS/SCH-150 LEARNING OUTCOMES for Learning Outcome A

The Sophomore Research Seminar (SRS) and Scholars Research Seminar (SCH-150) 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.

II. COMMON CURRICULUM ASSESSMENT 2014-2015

The primary goals of Common Curriculum assessment are to 1) support reflective teaching and faculty development, 2) encourage pedagogical and curricular innovation, 3) promote transfer of best practice in the Common Curriculum to instruction in other courses, 4) provide a systematic foundation for the on-going evaluation of specific program requirements with a view to improvement, even replacement. We also use this process to review and amend Common Curriculum assessment itself.

The class of 2017 sample was made up of students from across the campus. For the class of 2018, the Gen Ed Board decided to create a sample of just students who entered as declared majors in Center 2, Sciences and Engineering. For the class of 2019, the Gen Ed board decided to create a sample of just students who entered as declared majors in Center 1, Arts and Humanities and Social Sciences. We hope with these focussed samples to evaluate and compare the experiences of students in the Common Curriculum from the respective centers. For the class of 2020, we will return to a general sample of students across the campus.

As of the completion of the 2014-2015 academic year, faculty had submitted 34% of the requested IARs for students in the class of 2017 sample. As of the completion of the 2014-2015 academic year, faculty had submitted 50% of the requested IARs for students in the class of 2018 sample. There has been a significant improvement in response rates since the pilot year, but we are still far short of receiving all the IARs requested. We improved our notification system to faculty, though we still lose track of the occasional student who changes her/his course schedule after the first week of term or drops a course. We also now send department chairs/assessment coordinators an email with the assessment assignments for their colleagues. Many faculty (rightly) view assessment as another ‘unfunded mandate’ imposed on them. The Common Curriculum assessment suffers from this association. We have worked hard to make the process ‘cost-effective’ and useful, but it still represents a genuine demand on faculty time. We hope, as more information comes in from the CC assessment, to improve how we close the loop through ‘faculty development’ initiatives and demonstrate how the findings lead to program improvements. Nonetheless, we have probably reached a point when senior administrative support will become necessary to boost response rates. We see 2015-2016 as a key benchmark year in determining what level and kind of administrative intervention will be necessary.

Faculty frequently express concern that students do not complete courses in the Common Curriculum early enough for them to act as a real foundation for further academic study or as a spur to explore the Liberal Arts or discover new interests. We found, overall, students in the 2017 and 2018 samples actually made good progress toward completion of the program in the first year. *See Table CC1.*

Number of CC courses completed	Class of 2017 Sample	Class of 2018 Sample
1	0	0
2	3.8%	0
3	7.7%	0
4	11.5%	14%
5	26.9%	19%
6	26.9%	43%
7	19.2%	19%
8	3.8%	5%
9	0	0

Students made good progress across all requirements except for the completion of SCLB and SET by students in the 2017 sample; the long-standing problem of inadequate seats/sections for first-year and sophomore non-science majors effectively shuts out all but science and engineering students or seniors in courses available for Common Curriculum science credit. The significantly higher percentages of students completing SCLB and SET in the 2018 sample, made up of Center 2 students) reflects the extent of this. It also suggests that the degree to which the percentage of students who completed the SET and SCLB requirements in year one in the 2017 sample is skewed by the Center 2 students in the general sample. The SET and SCLB completion rates for the 2019 sample, which will be Center 1 students only, should give us data on the extent of the problem. *See Table CC2.*

Common Curriculum Requirement	Class of 2017 (General)	Class of 2018 (Center 2)
FYP/FYP-H	100%	100%
SRS/SCH-150	15% (SCH-150)	14% (SCH-150)
Literature (HUL)	62%	57%
Arts and Humanities (HUM)	58%	38%
Social Sciences (SOCS)	77%	62%
Quantitative and Mathematical Reasoning (QMR)	50%	86%
Natural Sciences with Lab (SCLB)	42%	67%
Science, Engineering, Technology (SET)	54%	86%
Languages and Cultures (LCC – Languages)	38%	24%
Languages and Cultures LCC – Cultures)	46%	24%
Languages and Cultures (Study Abroad)	0	0

We have aggregate proficiency data for all three learning outcomes now that the process has been underway for two years. *See Table CC3.*

Table CC3. Proficiency Levels across Learning Outcomes A, B, C (% of students at the assigned proficiency level in individual assessment reports (IARs))

Proficiency Level / Sample Year	Learning Outcome A Critical and Analytical Thinking		Learning Outcome B Making Connections		Learning Outcome C Reflective Learning	
	2017	2018	2017	2018	2017	2018
Exceptional	6.5%	4.3%	11.3%	6.5%	11.3%	6.5%
Mastery	22.6%	28.3%	17.7%	21.7%	16.1%	15.2%
Proficient	41.9%	28.3%	32.3%	34.8%	22.6%	28.3%
Developmental	27.4%	34.8%	16.1%	23.9%	8.1%	17.4%
Insufficient	1.6%	4.3%	0	13.0%	3.2%	0
Not Applicable / No Data / Not Observed	0	0	22.6%	0	41.9%	32.6%

We note several points in this data. First, the Gen Ed Board improved the description and explanation of learning outcome B in 2014. In 2013-2014, faculty did not observe, apply, or record data for learning outcome B for 26.5% of students in their assessments. By contrast, the two-year percentage for the 2017 sample shows a decline to 22.6%, reflecting the fact no faculty failed to observe, apply, or record data for this learning outcome in assessments carried out in 2014-2015. Learning outcome B was observed, applied, or recorded for all students in the 2018 sample in 2014-2015. Learning outcome B is now better understood and integrated in the assessment of students in CC courses. Learning outcome C demonstrated much the same problem in 2013-2014, only to a greater degree. While some progress has been made from the 2017 to 2018 samples, the Gen Ed Board will continue to work on helping faculty integrate and assess this learning outcome in courses. That said, it should be noted that learning outcome C is primarily assessed through the student reflective essay, which the Class of 2017 sample will complete for the first time in Fall 2016. We expect a good deal more data on learning outcome C at that point.

Second, we note that instructors held students to a high standard in all learning outcomes but especially in learning outcome A, demonstrated by the large numbers of students at the developmental level and the very small number of students at an exceptional level. The narrative description of assignments (which the Gen Ed Board reviewed, along with accompanying student work) and the assessment of students' learning support these aggregate results.

Finally, we found via this data and, especially, in the narrative information that learning outcome B and C presented the most difficulty for departments teaching courses for QMR, SCLB, and SET credit. Some instructors simply stated that the courses were not designed to make connections

between essential disciplinary content and either academic debates or broader issues outside the course; it was not deemed appropriate or possible, especially in introductory level courses. The Gen Ed Board concluded that in some instances these comments reflected the poor wording in earlier iterations of learning outcomes B and C. Members actually found evidence of the connections and reflective learning sought via learning outcomes B and C respectively in the assignments and narrative assessment. In other instances, the Gen Ed Board found some courses so focussed on the delivery of disciplinary content that it was difficult for instructors to identify and evaluate learning outcome B or C, even sometimes outcome A.

The primary goals of Common Curriculum assessment are:

- 1) to support reflective teaching and faculty development
- 2) to encourage pedagogical and curricular innovation
- 3) to promote transfer of best practice in the Common Curriculum to instruction in other courses
- 4) to provide a systematic foundation for the on-going evaluation of specific program requirements with a view to improvement, even replacement.

For 2013-2014 and 2014-2015 the Gen Ed Board focussed overwhelmingly on goals one through three. We first of all see the focus on real classrooms, teaching, and student learning as the essential value of assessment for the program. Second, these goals have the greatest potential to encourage 'buy-in' to both Common Curriculum assessment and the program itself. Goal four should naturally follow from the other three in partnership with the administrative oversight and broad intellectual stewardship of the program carried out by the Gen Ed Board and Director of General Education (DGE).

This is how we close the loop with assessment:

- 1) The questions on the IAR are designed so that faculty scrutinize the pedagogical foundation of assignments with learning outcomes directly in mind. We see evidence in the narrative portion of the IAR that faculty members are indeed doing so. Since 2014 we also see evidence of this in new course proposals, where faculty are expected to explain (briefly) how their courses will address the CC learning outcomes. Reading the IARs and new course proposals has precipitated many conversations about instructional design and learning goals with our own courses in mind. Below are some of the ways the Gen Ed Board is developing opportunities for transfer learning to occur for all faculty.
- 2) Faculty currently have direct access to Common Curriculum assessment at three points:
 - a) enrolment in the Nexus course *Teaching the Common Curriculum* (TCC) explained below;
 - b) the program website that contains all the relevant assessment documents, annual reports, and a teaching 'highlights' webpage (including links to actual assignments being taught by instructors in the program);
 - c) the college assessment website.
- 3) Each faculty member is enrolled in TCC as a primary support for faculty development. For the pilot year we have created a folder for Common Curriculum Assessment that includes

practical information, pedagogical guides for teaching and evaluating learning outcome A, and samples from the 2017 and 2018 IARs organized by Common Curriculum requirements. This folder assists faculty in completing the IAR and in studying teaching and learning in their colleagues' classes. We expect that TCC will evolve to include a dedicated resource folder for each of the program requirements; for example, it currently includes the materials for the SRS faculty workshops, sample syllabi, and assignments. The initiative for creating these resource folders currently comes from the DGE and Gen Ed Board, but much more faculty input will be encouraged. We expect that the annual assessment report, IARs, and supporting materials and information about particular requirements as experienced by real students will provide the opportunity for faculty to reflect on the program or their own teaching within it with a view to pedagogical improvements and innovation.

- 4) As we identify both best practice and areas of concern with respect to goals 1 and 2, the DGE will regularly update the teaching highlights webpage. This webpage is meant to be a kind of one-stop highlight 'reel' of great teaching in the Common Curriculum for interested faculty (with onward links to assignments and the TCC). The Gen Ed Board also holds one assessment workshop a term open to all faculty. For 2013-2014 the workshops dealt with the mechanics of the new process, but future workshops will take on the pedagogical focus of SRS workshops. Finally, the Gen Ed Board will work with the Committee on Teaching (COT), Director of Faculty Development, and other relevant parties to create more targeted instructional workshops. All of these initial steps enable us to work on achieving goal 3.
- 5) The annual assessment report should be a tool for departments and programs to align their courses to the Common Curriculum learning outcomes and evaluate their success in doing so. We will also follow-up directly with chairs and directors whose departments and programs seem most affected by our annual assessment and recommendations.
- 6) The annual assessment report provides guidance for the Gen Ed Board in the course approval process. More simply put, it gives the board a basis from which to look for strengths and weaknesses in courses proposed for Common Curriculum credit based on best practice and areas of concern. The board now gives faculty better, more specific guidance on revision and resubmission of courses, supported by the resources available in TCC. Further, in 2013, the Gen Ed Board approved and instituted a policy for the review of courses carrying Common Curriculum credit; review of existing courses can be informed by the assessment findings in the same fashion as that for new courses proposals.

III. SOPHOMORE/SCHOLARS RESEARCH SEMINAR ASSESSMENT 2014-2015

Instructors complete the SRS/SCH-150 individual assessment report for each student at the end of the term; the assessment is based on the final research project. Instructors submit the anonymous assessments to the DGE; the process of anonymous assessment and reporting protects student and faculty confidentiality and constitutes a binding condition of SRS/SCH-150 assessment. One SRS/SCH-150 workshop in the spring term of the academic year processes the assessment results. SRS/SCH-150 faculty in the workshop develop suggestions for program improvements based on any issues that may emerge from reviewing the assessments. The DGE incorporates suggestions (if any) into appropriate on-going and new SRS faculty development or broader program improvements. The SRS/SCH-150 assessment form can be found at <http://www.union.edu/offices/gen-ed/program-administration/assessment/>

The most recent SRS/SCH-150 assessment results can be found in tables CC4 and CC5 below.

Proficiency Level		Exceeds Expectations		Meets Expectations		Below Expectations	
Learning Outcome	Academic Year	13-14	14-15	13-14	14-15	13-14	14-15
Develop a Research Topic		34.5	27.7	57.0	61.8	8.5	10.5
Find Evidence		34.1	26.7	54.3	59.1	11.6	21.6
Evaluate Evidence		28.3	23.6	57.4	54.4	14.3	22.0
Develop and Evidence-based Argument		22.9	24.3	58.9	52.7	18.2	23.0
Present Research Findings		25.2	23.0	58.1	55.7	16.7	21.3
Practice Professional Standards of Citation		20.5	22.0	68.6	63.2	10.9	14.8

Proficiency Level		Exceeds Expectations		Meets Expectations		Below Expectations	
Learning Outcome	Academic Year	13-14	14-15	13-14	14-15	13-14	14-15
Develop a Research Topic		31.7	28.6	60.0	60.7	8.3	10.7
Find Evidence		31.7	38.0	58.3	52.4	10.0	9.5
Evaluate Evidence		23.3	36.9	66.7	55.9	10.0	7.1
Develop and Evidence-based Argument		36.7	44.0	53.3	46.4	10.0	9.5
Present Research Findings		36.7	36.9	55.0	51.2	8.3	11.9
Practice Professional Standards of Citation		29.1	20.2	56.6	70.2	11.3	9.5

SRS/SCH workshops along with oversight and individual initiatives by the DGE and General Education Board are the chief vehicles for closing the loop on SRS assessment. Topics and content are designed by the DGE and SRS/SCH-150 faculty to help improve pedagogical practices and reflect on the broader purposes and effectiveness of the program. SRS/SCH-150 workshops

each term are geared toward the same general themes: faculty development issues for new instructors (Fall); examples of pedagogical and instructional best practice or innovation (Winter); assessment and broader program issues (Spring). These workshops typically occasion broad-ranging discussions and the issues and questions raised and addressed between 2011 and 2015 are the following; upcoming workshops devoted to these questions are noted.

- 1) How do we teach research to undergraduates in just ten weeks? (Fall 2015)
- 2) How do we set program-wide standards for evaluating SRS/SCH-150 research projects? (Fall 2015)
- 3) What are the pedagogical and research benefits of incorporating poster sessions into SRS/SCH-150? (Fall 2015)
- 4) Why do the greatest number of students working below expectations struggle with finding and evaluating evidence and producing a strong evidence-based project? How do we teach students to critically and ethically evaluate evidence? (Winter 2016)
- 5) How can you use a single, very short assignment (micro-assignment) to teach a lot of critical thinking, research skills, and writing techniques? (Winter 2016)
- 6) Is an SRS/SCH-150 an SRS/SCH-150 without a 12-18 page term paper as the final 'product'? (Spring 2016)
- 7) Are SRS/SCH-150s scheduled in the optimum time slot(s) for effective teaching and learning? (Spring 2016)
- 8) Can information literacy be a platform for a more consistent approach to achieving the goals of the SRS/SCH-150?
- 9) How can electronic instructional infrastructure and Schaffer Library services support the goals of the SRS/SCH-150?

Based on these workshops, the Gen Ed Board, DGE, and faculty have worked to close the loop with these initiatives:

- 1) Improve the SRS/SCH-150 folder in TCC as a site devoted to faculty development and teaching strategies for the course.
- 2) Develop and share among SRS/SCH-150 faculty exercises that focus on the critical and ethical evaluation of evidence and its effective incorporation within an argument.
- 3) Develop and share among SRS/SCH-150 faculty exercises that focus on the effective incorporation of evidence within an argument.
- 4) Improve deliberateness with which links between pedagogical strategies and learning goals are communicated to students in syllabi, assignments, and in overall instruction.
- 5) Consider more specific and descriptive proficiency categories for the assessment instrument; this will be addressed in the integration of SRS/SCH-150 assessment with the new Common Curriculum assessment process.

Finally, the Gen Ed Board and DGE continues to evaluate broader questions surrounding the SRS/SCH-150:

- 1) Beginning with 2015-2016, the Gen Ed Board will review and approve all new and existing SCH-150 courses. A common proposal form will be developed for SRS/SCH-150. The Gen Ed Board will not recruit or select instructors for SCH-150, which is handled by the Director of the Scholars Program.
- 2) The Gen Ed Board has begun a review of the statement of goals and purposes on the SRS portion of the Common Curriculum website around a stronger emphasis on inquiry/problem-based learning. This process will lead to a revision of the SRS/SCH-150 guidelines and proposal process, and, as needed, revision of the SRS assessment rubric. This comes partly in response to the fact that faculty in social sciences and humanities teach the majority of the SRS/SCH-150 sections, typically for structural reasons relating to staffing and resources or the pedagogical inclination of individual faculty members; a number of scientists and engineers have stated that “research” in their fields cannot be taught under the auspices of or according to the existing learning outcomes of the SRS. This is not in fact true except in a very rigid definition of “research” but the Gen Ed Board and DGE do recognize that the goals, purposes, and guidelines as currently stated are responsible for pedagogical misunderstandings of this sort and are determined to address them.
- 3) Solicited, received, and approved several experimental SRSs for 2014-2015 that allow more flexible student research projects outside the strict 12-18 pages term paper.
- 4) The DGE and Gen Ed Board will examine the desirability and feasibility of moving SRS to the first year and making direct linkages between it and FYP as part of a ‘one-two punch’ in the first year experience of Union students. The Honours SRS (SCH-150) is currently taught in the first year and we will look at the feasibility of making that the norm for all Union first-year students in a phased transition.

IV. INTEGRATED COMMON CURRICULUM ASSESSMENT

Currently, neither FYP nor SRS assessment are fully integrated into the new Common Curriculum assessment process. The Gen Ed Board and DGE intend to integrate them into one Common Curriculum assessment process as follows:

- 1) Continue the individual assessment of each student in each FYP/FYP-H and SRS/SCH-150.
- 2) For 2016-2017, eliminate the paper/hardcopy FYP and SRS assessments in favour of a single integrated webapp IAR built on the current IAR platform. The IAR-FYP/H and IAR-SRS/SCH-150 substitute the FYP and SRS assessment rubrics for learning outcome A in the current IAR. Proficiency categories in the current FYP and SRS rubrics will be replaced by the current IAR proficiency levels, thus creating a consistent set of assessment standards. FYP/H and SRS/SCH-150 instructors will complete the same summative assessment of learning outcome A as in the current IAR to provide an aggregate assessment across all Common Curriculum courses. FYP/H and SRS/SCH-150 instructors will also complete the same summative assessment of learning outcomes B and C to better integrate FYP/H and SRS/SCH-150 within the broad programmatic goals of the Common Curriculum. These changes will be phased in during 2015-2016 with the elimination of the paper/hardcopy assessment beginning in Fall 2016.
- 3) FYP/H assessment currently resides with the Dean of Studies. The integration proposed above should occur for FYP over two years. Year one should move the assessment process for FYP under the DGE and Program Assistant; faculty development for FYP (workshops) should remain under the Dean of Studies in year one. Year two should move the faculty development for FYP under the DGE and fully integrate it with the broader initiatives for the Common Curriculum outlined above.