

Report to the Learning Outcomes Oversight Committee

General Education Learning Outcomes Assessment at URI

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1. URI faculty committees have been taking steps to develop and implement general education assessment procedures, beginning in Spring 2005. Student surveys and samples of work from existing courses have been drawn repeatedly. Faculty Senate legislation was passed in the fall of 2005 and periodic meetings with broader faculty groups have gradually increased faculty awareness of the approved learning outcome objectives. University funding from the Provost's Office has supported these activities. The Subcommittee on Assessment of General Education (SAGE), initially chaired by C.B. Peters, was approved by the Faculty Senate as the organizational mechanism for furthering this process, and reports to the University College and General Education Committee.
2. URI has sponsored a number of capacity-building experiences for faculty at regional and national conferences, one national conference presentation of our own novel assessment approach (in March 2007), and one accepted for presentation at AAC&U in February 2009. Grant funding obtained by the Office of Student Learning, Outcome Assessment, and Accreditation has been essential for much of this activity.
3. Our current General Education program is a hybrid of two complementary models: (1) the expectation that all students should know about and be able to use modes of thought and methods of inquiry associated with each "core knowledge domain" (e.g. social sciences, natural sciences); and (2) the expectation that all students should graduate with eight strengthened "skills" (e.g. writing, using quantitative data) that can be practiced across the disciplines. Three of these skills have been designated as "core skills" with their own course requirements. All eight are "integrated" in courses across the general education spectrum.
4. Our current learning outcome objectives (2008-09 Catalog p. 33) reflect an emphasis on the pedagogical expectation that students will learn to engage with and solve problems within the varied perspectives represented by the four core knowledge domains, i.e. identify, recognize, ask, collect, and analyze information to solve problems in both academic and applied contexts. A report to the Faculty Senate from the fall of 2005, titled Learning Outcome Objectives for General Education at the University of Rhode Island, provides details.
5. Innovations in our evolving general education program can be supported within the assessment framework we have adopted, as long as a general "problem-solving" vision for student learning is maintained. Our approach is responsive to state-of-the-art ideas about liberal learning, e.g. the recent statement in a keynote address by Stanley Katz (faculty chair of the undergraduate program at Princeton) that "what the liberal educator seeks to develop is the capacity to recognize meaningful problems and to identify the information and modes of analysis necessary to address them ..." (Katz, S.N. (2008) Assessment and general education: Resisting reductionism without resisting responsibility. *Liberal Education*, 94(3)).
6. A major step was taken in the summer of 2008 to implement assessment procedures based on the approved objectives, working with a large random stratified sample of general education courses obtained by SAGE from Fall 2007 courses. Students had been surveyed at the end of the semester for a self-report perspective (approximately 173 sections were invited, and 105 participated, yielding 3,609 student responses). To assess learning outcomes directly, both assignments and student work were sampled for intensive development of a coding scheme representing our learning outcome aspirations (55 assignments were submitted by instructors from 50 sections).
7. Results from the Summer 2008 assignment classification process were generally reassuring, and in some ways more positive than the committee had anticipated: 82% of all classified assignments in Core Knowledge domains called for more than rote memorization ("identification"), and over half called for one

or more levels of analysis. Although very few called for students to generate their own original hypotheses or major questions (“ask”), 23% did call for active collection of data (e.g. laboratory investigation, review of relevant published literature, systematic qualitative observation). Many (73%) called for students to recognize which concepts could be used to answer a question or solve a problem, and most of those also called for the student to follow through on applying the concepts to arrive at a solution.

8. Results from the student self-report survey are still being analyzed, but these also convey a useful perspective, i.e. what do students think they are learning in their general education courses? One striking positive finding is the extent to which students perceive their English Communication courses as providing opportunities for skill learning and problem solving far beyond their most direct purpose, helping students to increase their mastery of writing and speaking English.
9. With extensive support from Deborah Grossman-Garber, Elaine Finan, and the staff at the Office for Student Learning, Outcomes Assessment, and Accreditation, the SAGE subcommittee that worked with the Fall 2007 samples convened a larger group of faculty representing various relevant committees in late June, 2008 for a 2-day meeting, to report their findings and solicit input on next steps. A meeting was also held with Provost DeHayes in September 2008 to report on progress and initiate dialogue on our approach to general education assessment at URI.
10. SAGE has resumed work this fall to keep the assessment process moving forward, with 10 members drawn from many departments contributing to general education. Our strategic goal is full implementation of a cyclic process of assessment in general education, with reports on findings and recommendations submitted annually to UCGE and the Faculty Senate, within the next three years. Each step will include feedback on what we have learned, with recommendations, so that “completing the loop” will be an ongoing process.
11. **Next steps** for this process involve work by SAGE, following recommendations from the faculty group convened this summer, to create core knowledge focus groups for refinement of the coding scheme. These groups will also further operationalization of the objectives via rubrics for assessing student work. Simultaneously the University College and General Education Committee will undertake educational activities with colleges, departments and instructors to culminate in syllabus representation of the learning outcomes by the fall of 2009. A report to the Office of Higher Education due October 20, 2008 will summarize our progress and plans.
12. In the spring of 2009, SAGE will continue to: refined decision rules for classifying assignments, based on focus group input; define rubrics starting from the existing sample of student work; design a new sample of courses and assignments with a random sampling approach for Fall 2009; clarify expectations for what is to be included in the materials provided by course instructors (e.g. type of assignment, time in term, number of student responses to assignment, syllabus, and rubric); and begin to address Integrated Skills and Core Skills.
13. **Assistance from LOOC** will be necessary to: review the approval process for general education reports to OHE, including timing, disclosure, and reporting format; consider resource needs for general education assessment; consider the long-term cycle for program assessment in general education, and integration with Wabash, FSSE, and NSSE; implement campus-wide programs to engage faculty with assessment and close the loop; and attend to the incorporation of general education assessment findings in the planning and budgeting process.
14. **Needed resources:** Continuing support from the Office of Student Learning, Outcome Assessment, and Accreditation will be essential as we work to engage faculty across the University spectrum of general education on our several campuses. Continuing financial support from the Provost’s Office will also be critical. The most successful approach to analyzing and reporting on our general education program has included summer recontracting opportunities for small, dedicated groups of faculty who have made substantial progress each summer. Conference attendance and presentation is also a step to greater visibility and capacity.