



LEARNING OUTCOME OBJECTIVES FOR GENERAL EDUCATION AT THE UNIVERSITY OF RHODE ISLAND

Charge, Organization, and Membership

The following represents a summary of the work of the Ad Hoc Committee on General Education Learning Outcomes. The committee was established by invitation from Interim Vice Provost Judith Swift in consultation with Deborah Grossman-Garber, College of Life and Environmental Sciences; John Stevenson, Department of Psychology; and C. B. Peters, Department of Sociology and Anthropology. The committee was charged to develop learning outcome statements for the University's General Education Program. The committee consisted of the following members:

Nedra Reynolds, Director, College Writing Program
Mary MacDonald, University Library
Emily Anderson, Undergraduate Student
Carter Johnson, University Assessment Office
David Heskett, Department of Physics
Julia Johnson, Department of Communication Studies
Anne Hubbard, College of Continuing Education
John Montgomery, Department of Mathematics
Judy Van Wyk, Department of Sociology and Anthropology
Pamela Rohland, Student Disability Services
Cheryl Foster, Department of Philosophy
John Stevenson, Department of Psychology, Co-Chair
C. B. Peters, Department of Sociology and Anthropology, Co-Chair

The committee gathered for an organizational meeting with Dr. Peggy Maki, the University's consultant on Outcomes Assessment in May 2005. Following that meeting, the committee met seven times through Summer 2005, working as a committee of the whole.

Background and Process Assumptions

The University's General Education program presents daunting challenges for student outcomes assessment. Although the program is knitted together by seven "core" areas and eight "integrated" skills, there are no particular course requirements and only minimal skills requirements that all students are required to meet. Although the consequences of this flexibility serve the University's students and programs well, they make writing specific, content-rich General Education outcomes statements impractical. Further, flexibility of the General Education program makes it equally impractical to assess individual students – programs of study that satisfy the General Education requirements are infinitely variable in both content and skills.

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Outcome statements are not meant to add components to the University's General Education program. Rather, they merely operationalize the goals and objectives already articulated in the Framework of the program. In a sense, the outcome statements state in clear language what students will know and be able to do if the General Education program meets the goals the faculty have set for it.

Against that backdrop, the Ad Hoc Group on General Education Outcomes Assessment made the following decisions regarding the process of General Education outcomes assessment and the nature of the General Education outcomes statements.

- The process of General Education outcomes assessment should be directed at the program itself rather than at individual students. The outcome statements contained in this document were drafted on the assumption that the program would be assessed through the collection of "artifacts" (assignments, activities, examinations, papers, etc) that embodied particular outcomes, along with student responses to those artifacts. The artifacts would provide a gauge of how often students were given the opportunity to develop the cognitive outcomes and the samples of student responses would provide a sense of what constituted adequate performance.
- The draft outcome statements recognize that the University's General Education Program serves two primary functions. First, it provides students the opportunity to gain the knowledge and skills necessary for success in further studies at the University. Second, it provides students the opportunity to gain the knowledge and skills necessary to their roles as thoughtful and engaged citizens in a diverse and complex world. Accordingly, each outcome statement implies that students will be able to perform the designated cognitive task in both academic and non-academic settings.

Rationale for General Education Learning Outcome Objectives

The General Education Program at the University of Rhode Island provides all students with a set of opportunities to gain content knowledge and master skills across a specified set of domains. Content knowledge is provided in four core areas (Fine Arts & Literature; Letters; Natural Sciences; Social Sciences) and skills are provided in three additional core areas (English Communication; Foreign Language and Culture; Mathematics) as well as eight embedded skills (writing effectively, etc.).

Each of the Core Areas and Integrated Skills are described in the General Education section of the Undergraduate Catalog as well as in Faculty Senate materials. These descriptions provide essential information about what students are expected to gain from completion of the General Education requirements at the University. The Learning Outcome Objectives are intended to reflect those expectations and provide a broad framework for the more specific aspirations associated with each Core Area.

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Furthermore, the knowledge and skills acquired in completing General Education requirements are expected to have lasting consequences. These include both facilitation of success in subsequent specialized study at the University (i.e. majors and minors) and competence for the role of thoughtful and engaged citizen in a diverse and complex world.

By the time of graduation, students are expected to integrate knowledge and skills from general education with learning in the major and the whole array of academic, co-curricular, and non-academic learning experiences fostered by the University.

To judge the effectiveness of the General Education program, the faculty have identified five relatively proximate learning outcomes from students' direct experience with the courses taken to meet General Education requirements. Beyond these proximate objectives for the General Education program are expectations for added learning resulting from specialization (major, minor) and the integration of the totality of the undergraduate experience. The latter are defined and measured by departmental objectives for their majors.

Characteristics of General Education Learning Outcome Objectives

There are five general learning outcome identified by the committee. These outcome statements:

- Can be seen as a sequence of increasingly challenging cognitive tasks, moving from the relatively simple “identification “ of concepts, theories, and developments to the use of those concepts, theories, and developments in an “analysis” to address questions or solve problems.
- Can be manifested with relatively highly structured problems likely to be presented in General Education courses as well as in the more sophisticated lines of inquiry directed at applications to self-selected and/or ill-defined problems likely to be found in advanced study.
- Address both the content (knowledge) and skills components of General Education, as the skills are essential for completing work representing mastery of the defined cognitive tasks. Special note should be made that “human differences” skills are expected to be manifested in work used to document learning outcomes across the five cognitive tasks.
- Delimit relatively broad categories of cognitive work, and are best seen as designators for sets of related tasks. For example, “identify” names a category of tasks that also includes “define,” “list,” “articulate,” and so on. Similarly, “analyze” encompasses such tasks as “interpret,” “evaluate,” and “apply.” It is important to recognize that disciplines often use differing terminology to refer to these tasks.
- Can be assessed by applying faculty-generated standards to products (“artifacts”) resulting from activities and assignments in General Education courses.

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- Call for ability to apply learning in both academic and non-academic settings, in keeping with the two primary roles of General Education described above (foundation for academic specialization and engaged citizenship).

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Statements of General Education Learning Outcome Objectives

Identify:

Students will be able to:

- Identify basic concepts, theories, and developments in literature and the fine arts.
- Identify basic concepts, theories, and developments in humanistic inquiry.
- Identify basic concepts, theories, and developments in the natural sciences.
- Identify basic concepts, theories, and developments in the social sciences.

Recognize:

Students will be able to:

- Recognize aesthetic and literary elements and forms in relevant academic and non-academic settings.
- Recognize humanistic issues in relevant academic and non-academic settings.
- Recognize natural science issues in relevant academic and non-academic settings.
- Recognize social science issues in relevant academic and non-academic settings.

Ask:

Students will be able to:

- Ask questions appropriate to the modes of inquiry in the fine arts and literature in relevant academic and non-academic contexts.
- Ask questions appropriate to the modes of inquiry in Letters disciplines in relevant academic and non-academic contexts.
- Ask questions appropriate to the modes of inquiry in the natural sciences in relevant academic and non-academic contexts.
- Ask questions appropriate to the modes of inquiry in the social sciences in relevant academic and non-academic contexts.

Collect:

Students will be able to:

- Collect information relevant to the questions raised in the fine arts and literature.
- Collect information relevant to the questions raised in the Letters disciplines.
- Collect information relevant to the questions raised in the natural sciences.
- Collect information relevant to the questions raised in the social sciences.

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Analyze:

Students will be able to:

Analyze information in order to address questions or solve problems in the fine arts and literature.

Analyze information in order to address questions or solve problems in the Letters disciplines.

Analyze information in order to address questions or solve problems in the natural sciences.

Analyze information in order to address questions or solve problems in the social sciences.

Tentative Steps Toward Approval and Implementation

We recommend the following process in order to build on the work of the committee and the draft learning outcomes contained in this document.

- Fall '05: Faculty Senate Executive Committee endorses the plan to proceed using the proposed statements of objectives and the general approach outlined below.
- Fall '05: Faculty Senate Executive Committee appoints a planning committee (nominally a subcommittee of the UCGE Committee, with some representation from that committee as well as other selected members)
- Fall '05 - Spring '06: The General Education Subcommittee on Learning Outcomes Assessment is charged to accept the general approach and the proposed statements, with procedural modifications as needed. The subcommittee develops more specific plans for implementation and presents them to the Faculty Senate for approval.

Although there are any number of ways to proceed with outcomes assessment for general education, a plan like the following may be workable.

- Spring '06: The Subcommittee selects two core areas of general education for initial development. Using the learning objectives, the Subcommittee draws more specific examples from currently approved general education courses in those two core areas. These examples will be assignments, papers, projects, examinations, that provide “artifacts”, i.e. student work products, that could be used to assess success at the objectives. The committee uses the descriptions of the core areas to refine and clarify meaning of the objectives for chosen core areas.
- Spring '06: The Subcommittee recruits several general education course instructors from the selected core areas whose assignments are good exemplars. These instructors help to

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draft rubrics defining acceptable and unacceptable levels of student performance on the objectives.

- Summer '06: Faculty who have drafted rubrics review the course assignments for the two chosen core areas to assess how well we are doing at creating opportunities and expectations for students in line with our outcome objectives. That is, do the assignments themselves provide opportunities for students to learn and demonstrate the objectives?
- Summer '06: The subcommittee selects one core area for an initial pilot application of objectives and rubrics.
- Fall '06: In one core area (e.g. the Natural Sciences) instructors are asked to identify at least one assignment that meets an objective and to provide a random sample of student work (e.g. 10%) on that assignment. Alternatively several of the largest classes from that core area provide random samples for all of their assignments.
- Spring '07: Instructors from another core area are asked to provide similar work samples.
- Summer '07: Faculty groups receive modest compensation to rating products against rubrics for the two chosen core areas.
- Fall '07: A report on the summer findings is released and another core area is sampled. The results of the report are used to identify appropriate changes in the delivery or structure of general education if called for.
- Spring '08: A fourth core area is sampled
- Summer '08: Faculty groups receive modest compensation for rating products from those two core areas against rubrics
- Fall '09: A report of the summer findings is released. The results of the report are used to identify appropriate changes in the delivery or structure of general education if called for.

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