

Executive Summary: GE Assessment, 2005-2006

AY 2005-06 saw a major effort to assess student learning outcomes (SLO) in General Education at California State University, Chico. This work involved the combined efforts of the General Education Advisory Committee (GEAC) and the All University Responsibility for Assessment (AURA) committee, as well as the participation of more than 75 faculty members across the university from all Colleges. GE program assessment is mandated in [EM 99-05](#). The current effort represented a significant departure from past GE assessment efforts, striving to go beyond course assessment to examine foundational skills – oral communication, writing and quantitative reasoning – across a variety of GE courses. Task Forces composed of members of GEAC, AURA and additional faculty followed a common strategy of:

- using EM 99-05, in consultation with faculty, to define SLOs for these foundational skills,
- identifying courses in GE as sites for assessment;
- working with the faculty who teach these courses to identify assignments that could be used for embedded assessment of student learning on the SLOs identified,
- analyzing the results of student work and drawing conclusions about GE instruction and learning from this analysis.

The assessment process is discussed in more detail in Section II and Appendix A, with specific details on the assessment process for each of the domains examined in its respective portion in Section III.

Among our results and recommendations are the following:

1. A variety of GE writing assignments of appropriate complexity and academic rigor were identified in the courses examined. On the other hand, appropriate quantitative reasoning and oral communications tasks were not readily identified outside of courses specially designated for those purposes in Area A-1 and Area A-4. The lack of quantitative reasoning and oral communication tasks raises serious concerns, given the stated intent of campus GE policy: EM 99-05 states that “[i]n every course, relevant skills of the Core must be applied as essential to the process of mastering content and making applications.” (emphasis added). This objective is further reinforced in EM 99-05’s discussion of the capstone requirement, stating that “[t]hemes will incorporate, build upon, and nurture skills from Area A...” *Our report calls for a campus conversation on how best to incorporate quantitative reasoning and oral communication throughout GE, particularly in the Upper Division Themes.*
2. Cross-sectional data comparing the performance of first-year students versus seniors revealed statistically significant gains in writing in GE courses in the three dimensions of writing examined: Content, Organization and Argumentation, and Grammar and Other Surface Features. This same trend was not apparent in Oral Communication, where the examples of student oral

performance in Area A-1 courses (CMST 131, 132) were, on average, of higher quality than presentations examined from Upper Division Theme courses. Cross-sectional data on quantitative reasoning did not reveal any significant difference in the performance of first-year versus other students on either of the two quantitative reasoning tasks assessed (a probability problem and a calculus problem). *Cross-sectional data reveal a mixed picture of our students' performance and development in the foundational skills examined. Gains, where present, were modest and some skills showed no gains or deterioration. We call for a campus-wide discussion of these results as well as ongoing assessment to better capture changes in student performance in these areas, as the cross-sectional data examined here have limitations in this regard.*

3. The Writing Task Force noted great variability in writing assignments, as well as among our readers in assessing writing. The variability in assignments is to be expected given the variety of courses examined, faculty prerogatives in creating assignments, and is not, in itself, any cause for concern. The lack of practice and “nurturing” of oral communications and quantitative reasoning skills in GE, and the apparent lack of “progress” by more advanced students in these areas, is more alarming. *We recommend that the university provide ongoing faculty development that supports efforts of faculty at all levels to craft effective, appropriate writing, oral communications and quantitative reasoning assignments, within and outside GE, that balance workload considerations with best pedagogical practices in these domains.*
4. We feel that Task Force members, in consultation with faculty colleagues, made good progress in terms of defining SLOs in core areas of GE, as well as in creating rubrics helpful in assessing and grading student work. From this follows two recommendations: *(1) SLOs and rubrics should be widely circulated to faculty for further input and refinement so that these can be adopted and used, where faculty so desire, as well as shared with students to clarify expectations regarding student performance in these areas. (2) The elaboration of SLOs and rubrics should be extended to other domains of GE including critical thinking, and coursework in Areas B, C, D and E. The creation of shared SLOs in GE will help clarify our objectives in GE instruction and provide the basis for ongoing assessment of GE courses.*
5. Task Force members, and many of the faculty who worked with us on this project, found the process and results extremely interesting and instructive regarding the state of GE and student learning on our campus. *It is important that this process, or one similar, be continued and extended to other domains of GE, not as a substitute for course-by-course review, but as an important support and addition. This process needs to be kept as unobtrusive and efficient as possible to avoid overburdening faculty (and students).*

As a first step in assessing the GE program, we feel this effort is a success. It is also incomplete. *The next steps of disseminating results, discussing and applying these results to curricular and pedagogical change in GE are critically important.* Those who carried out this work are divided as to whether the activities outlined here represent true GE program assessment, or simply “(sub-) Area” assessment. We need to consider alternate strategies, as well as modifications to the GE program itself, to get at a clearer picture of the contribution of GE to our students’ overall educational experience. We hope the issues raised in this report will advance this discussion.