

The Chico State Faculty Learning Community on Programmatic Assessment of General Education: Report to ITL

Introduction

Our learning community met seven times during the spring 2010 semester. One of our main motivations for convening this FLC is the recent passage of a thoroughly revised general education program on our campus. The new program is described in [EM 10-01](#). Among its features, referred to in this document, is the definition of the *Values* underlying the program, which, together with so-called "practical intellectual skills" constitute program-wide student learning outcomes.

The program-level SLOs are:

1. Oral Communication: Demonstrates effective listening and speaking skills necessary to organize information and deliver it effectively to the intended audience.
2. Written Communication: Demonstrates the ability to question, investigate and draw well-reasoned conclusions and to formulate ideas through effective written communication appropriate to the intended audience.
3. Critical Thinking: Identifies issues and problems raised in written texts, visual media and other forms of discourse, and assesses the relevance, adequacy and credibility of arguments and evidence used in reaching conclusions.
4. Mathematical Reasoning: Demonstrates knowledge of and applies mathematical or statistical methods to describe, analyze and solve problems in context.
5. Active Inquiry: Demonstrates knowledge of and applies research techniques and information technology appropriate to the intellectual and disciplinary context.
6. Personal and Social Responsibility: Demonstrates knowledge and skills necessary to take responsibility for one's own life and actions, and to recognize opportunities and responsibilities to become engaged in our various local, regional, national, and international communities.
7. Sustainability: Describes and explains the environmental dynamics associated with human activities, and assesses the value of balancing social and economic demands with the Earth's ability to sustain physical and biological resources and cultural diversity.
8. Diversity: Demonstrates an understanding of and facility with different intellectual viewpoints as well as the unique perspectives of others based on varied experiences, identities and social attributes.
9. Creativity: Takes intellectual risks and applies novel approaches to varied domains.
10. Global Engagement: Demonstrates knowledge and skills necessary to engage global cultures and peoples.

The most distinctive feature of our new GE program is the creation of "pathways" through the curriculum that, if followed, provide students with an interdisciplinary minor. Here is a brief description of Pathways from EM 10-01:

A Pathway connects courses structurally in an intellectually cohesive course of study that explores an issue or area from a multidisciplinary perspective. Pathways must be broad enough to include different disciplines and narrow enough to maintain thematic cohesion. Pathways will be designed to provide the opportunity for both intellectual coherence and exploration. Students are encouraged, but not required, to take all of their breadth courses in a pathway. A student completing 18 or more units in a Pathway, including 9 units of upper division coursework within that pathway, is awarded an interdisciplinary minor. (4)

Pathways will be the main sites for assessment and Pathway coordinators will be largely responsible for implementing assessment and reporting out to a campus-wide committee on results.

The passage of this new program in February 2010 provides the context for our deliberations as an FLC. The definition of GE program SLOs is a huge step forward for the campus and makes the job of assessment somewhat easier, as most sources insist that the definition of SLOs is the first step in formulating an effective assessment plan (Allen 2006:121). Yet even with this advantage, there remain important decisions about how, exactly, we wish to implement GE program level assessment on our campus. That was the main topic of discussion in our FLC.

Guided by journal articles on constructively participating in an FLC and on General Education assessment (see attached bibliography), a review of AAC&U VALUE rubrics, participation in a webinar on GE assessment organized by EduVentures, and examination of a campus-based electronic portfolio system (STEPS), we have engaged in an extensive dialogue about how our campus can best prepare for programmatic assessment of our newly developed GE program, scheduled for full, campus-wide implementation in Fall 2012. Even though that date is still a ways off, we convened this learning community now in order to make sure a well-thought out plan will be in place when our new program begins. To that end, we have created the following document for campus reflection and we have identified courses and processes to pilot GE assessment based on the EM 10-01 values in some Upper Division Theme courses in Fall 2010. Though we were asked to paste together individual essays, we believe this group-based document, followed by brief individual reflections is the most useful approach for our learning community.

Features of Successful Assessment

- Longitudinal data (via alumni and/or employer surveys, portfolios, etc.) is valuable. At the same time, it is also very time consuming and possibly expensive. The costs and benefits must be weighed carefully.

- Use of electronic portfolios (via STEPS or other software) would allow for assessment that is both embedded and potentially broad and longitudinal/developmental.
- Opportunities and support for faculty collaboration are a necessity. A successful assessment program is one that will foster the development of intellectual communities among faculty within a Pathway, analogous to the sense of shared purpose in an academic department.
- The guiding principle must be improvement of student learning, not turning in reports. That is, our focus will be "assessment for success and improvement" not "assessment for accountability." If done properly, assessment for success and improvement will provide accountability.
- Campus conversations on the broad and diverse meaning of each of the ten GE values may help the campus understand how to connect courses, assignments, SLOs and pathways to these values. These could be hosted by the [GE Implementation Team](#) and include a broad panel of "experts" to offer ideas on how to incorporate the values into courses. These could be held once a month throughout 2010-11. VALUE rubrics may play an important role in stimulating discussion of how student performance on these SLOs might be assessed.
- It may be an effective approach to ask Pathways to collect data every year, but not to require a report to the GE oversight committee every year.

Features to Avoid

- Any approach that increases workload or that has no intrinsic value to the instructors or students in a course should be avoided. Calls for increased reporting should be accompanied by decreased demands elsewhere.

Questions and Observations

- It seems the GE program could be assessed programmatically **either** via a cycle that examines 2 pathways each year on all the values, **or** by a cycle that examines 2 values each year across all the pathways. There are pros and cons to each approach. The latter approach has the advantage of keeping assessment more or less continuous, but not so burdensome as to be crushing. The former approach has the advantage of not requiring something from most folks each year and bringing GE review more in line with the Academic Program Review process. A third approach might be to have a very brief report due each year, with a more comprehensive review every five years.
- How do specific pathway SLOs, linked to the specific intellectual content of Pathways (e.g. "Globalization Studies"), relate to the broader GE SLOs? Is this an issue that is taken care of at the pathway entry stage and moot afterwards? Who, if anyone, is responsible for ongoing assessment of student learning of Pathway-specific content?
- How much flexibility should be given to pathway coordinators in terms of assessment expectations? Should there be a single template and a variety of tools? Or should the structure of

the assessment document itself be left up to the coordinator? Whatever approach is taken needs to be made very clear to Pathway Coordinators.

- If we use portfolios, should they be the responsibility of the student? course faculty? pathway coordinator?
- How do we foster faculty involvement? How can we support faculty development of sound pedagogical practice in areas like numeracy, communication, and critical thinking that cross-cut disciplinary boundaries? The available resources—human and financial—for such support are limited.
- Two philosophically divergent approaches to assessment seem to be emerging in the national conversation. One looks to rubrics and portfolios for a rich, deep understanding of student learning. The other looks to CLA and other standardized tests as a more formal/objective way of addressing learning accountability in higher education. Since the CSU Chancellor is forcing the CSU to "voluntarily" participate in the CLA, Chico will be forced to choose between using this data to create a weak picture of GE assessment that is of doubtful validity, or doing double-duty by taking on both approaches.
- Any given Pathway will probably emphasize some values/SLOs more than others. Is that ok?
- How can we construct an assessment process that helps us avoid the "blame game" of folks saying a topic or skill should have been covered elsewhere/previously? The classic example is writing: "My students can't write! They should have learned how to write in Freshman composition!" We need to communicate to the faculty (and students) that intellectual content and practices like writing are not mastered in one single context, but require iterative practice.
- How do we avoid having to do a major program change (and, thus, suffer through multiple layers of bureaucracy) for every tweak in a course description or course title? Can we think outside the box on this? Are we limited by current bureaucratic processes, or can we develop something like a "catalog Wiki" process by which folks will be freer to make changes and adaptations, responding to the changing needs of the Pathways program?
- Overall, it may be impossible to say with confidence that GE is the cause of achievement or lack of achievement for students in particular learning domains, but this may not matter as GE is designed to be a part of a larger university curriculum. For example, writing is probably the skill/learning outcome that suffers the most from "contamination" effects. It is the skill most likely to be taught throughout the university curriculum, and thus the most difficult to pinpoint the location of successes and challenges. In other words, if students are not writing as well as we would like, where do we turn for improvement?

Next Steps for our FLC

With substantial progress made in defining the principles of effective assessment for our GE program that fit our campus culture, the next steps for this FLC are to pilot some of these approaches in the immediate future. We ran out of time to mount even a tentative effort in this direction in Spring 2010,

but all the members of the FLC expressed a commitment to continue this work in Fall 2010 if resources can be found to support it. In reviewing our responsibilities in GE, it became clear that four members of the FLC will be teaching GE courses in Fall 2010 or coordinating Upper Division GE Themes where GE courses are offered (Fosen, McCarthy, Smith, Vela). We proposed creating two person teams of those teaching/coordinating GE courses and the remaining FLC members not directly responsible for GE courses in the Fall (Blake, Loker, Sager, Turner) to take the principles articulated in this document and derive assessment processes and methodologies that we can pilot test in the context of specific themes and courses. The two-person teams will work closely together and the FLC as a whole will meet as necessary (every two weeks, monthly?) to discuss progress and support each others' work. This effort will result in actual data collection—presumably of student work—data analysis and reporting out to the FLC and the broader campus community on the results of our efforts. These methodological experiments will be informed by the principles in this report, but teams will have the freedom and creativity to look for novel ways to implement these principles. It is hoped that this methodological pluralism will lead to the testing of a variety of approaches that can help advance our thinking about *programmatic* assessment of GE as we move toward implementation of our new GE program in Fall 2012. Some of the issues we discussed related to this process included the eventual need to assess both formatively (through comparisons of lower division GE work to work performed later in an academic career) and summatively (through GE capstone courses), as well as the need to begin assessing the SLOs specified by the new GE program.

Individual Reflections from FLC members

- **Matthew Blake:** The FLC, through the thoughtful weekly discussions and considerations, has aided my understanding of what constitutes a quality GE program and how other programs typically assess "quality." This has been effectively summarized by Bill Loker and others here. The most worthwhile exercises, though, have yet to occur. Most importantly, how can a GE program be properly assessed during periods of scant financial resources? While our meetings and discussions thus far have focused on the ideal system of assessment, the true merit of our work will be the implementation and application of the goals we continue to identify as being important during this period. Perhaps the only fortunate outcome of the current budget crisis is that we are forced design a program-based assessment that will be cost efficient and manageable during any period.
- **Chris Fosen:** Participation on the GE Faculty Learning Community has reinforced concepts I think are central to the assessment of student learning. As a composition teacher in the English Department, I start examining a rhetorical situation by asking about audience, purpose, and genre. I think assessment works similarly. As a campus, we need to think more carefully about who will read our assessments, why, and how these perhaps varied audiences might shape or constrain assessment as a practice. For too long we've assumed that assessment was for "someone else" without defining who that someone was—and until recently, GEAC (or the General Education Advisory Committee) acted similarly by not responding to faculty with feedback they could use in completing or revising their assessment cycles. What I imagine is something more robust than

“closing the loops” of assessment cycles—we should define the audiences who might benefit most from the assessments we complete, and then make sure we get our work to them. This could include turning assessment into research and publishing it in online or print journals; articulating local assessment needs with national accreditation standards; preparing assessment reports for publications on our local website; or imagining forms for reports that could be valuable in starting or maintaining communities of local practitioners. In each case the form (or genre) of the assessment and the situated methods for getting it done would arise from strategic thinking about who would read it, and this thinking would also go a long way to helping us be clearer about its purposes—or craft purposes that we could even believe in.

The meetings of the FLC have been invaluable. But I also think that we have more work to do: the semester ended just as our conversations were getting started. What might be very useful in the coming semesters would be to gather and publicize the new or innovative assessment methods or tools useful to faculty across the disciplines. On this campus the standard student learning “targets” seem to be the embedded test question, the response paper, and the research paper, and the persons doing the assessments are the teachers themselves or other faculty in the department. It also seems to be the case that once the assessments are done, the targets aren’t re-used or re-considered. Two pieces I read during our time together suggest alternatives. Condon (2009) constructed and reviewed a multi-purpose assessment of writing in which rising juniors wrote a reflective essay about the most influential courses they’ve taken and how these courses helped them meet two of the six university goals for undergraduate education. He writes: “Once the essays have served their immediate purpose as a diagnostic of writing competence, they continue to yield useful information about which courses are most effective, about what kinds of instruction students find most valuable, and about the extent to which the various learning goals are actually distributed throughout the curriculum” (145). This focus on *generative* prompts suggests that they can become significant sources of data and insight for more than one campus group or assessment need. Dochy, Segers, and Sluijsmans (1999) add to this perspective with their thorough review of 63 studies that used either self-, peer-, or co-assessment methods. They find that, used strategically, programmatic assessments of student learning could benefit in several ways from involving students more actively in how they are carried out. Perhaps one goal of the assessments we undertake should be to encourage students to become more responsible and reflective about their own learning. I would encourage our FLC to read more widely in GE administration and assessment in order to help the campus imagine new and innovative ways to get assessment done, and to see the potential benefits to our stakeholders and students in making assessment more generative.

- Dochy, F., M. Segers, and D. Sluijsmans. "The use of self-, peer-, and co-assessment in higher education: A review." *Studies in Higher Education* 24.3(1999): 331-350.
- Condon, William. "Looking beyond judging and ranking: Writing assessment as a generative practice." *Assessing Writing* 14 (2009): 141–156.

- **Bill Loker:** Our initial request to the CSU system-wide Institute for Teaching and Learning (ITL) to form an FLC on GE Assessment promised the following:
 - Meet with GE upper division theme coordinators to present the purposes of the FLC and identify members. Materials will be provided on GE program-level assessment, VALUE rubrics, orientation to proposed changes in GE.
 - #2 Meeting: Discuss resources, assessment methodologies. Goal of meeting will be to define GE SLOs and brainstorm approaches to assessment appropriate for Chico's GE program.
 - #3 Meeting: Plan for implementation, settle on assessment methodologies, and plan assessment activities with timeline for each step.
 - Collect student work for assessment purposes
 - Analyze student work for assessment purposes
 - #4 Meeting: Report out on assessment results (30-minute final reports from all 8 members)
 - Draft report to campus and ITL on project

Clearly this program of "learning" (work, really!) was overly ambitious. We never got to the point of specifying assessment practices and implementing those in our current GE program as a means of piloting approaches we might employ down the line for our new program. So, was the FLC a bust? Did we accomplish *anything*? And why didn't we get further in our work?

Perhaps the answer to this last question is found in the nature of FLCs in general and the genesis of our FLC in particular. Derochers (2010:2) describes FLCs: "Typically, FLCs consist of a cross-disciplinary faculty group of 8-14 members, engaged in a yearlong curriculum focused on exploring a specific issue." Well, our group fulfills 3 out of the 4 criteria: numbers (we started with 9 and finished with 8), cross-disciplinary (Journalism, English, Anthropology, Religious Studies, Business Information Systems, Music, Political Science and Psychology) and exploring a specific issue. We did not have anything like a year to work together, however. We received notice of the decision to fund the FLC in December immediately before winter break. Upon resumption of classes (1/25/10) we began to firm up commitments for individuals to participate in the FLC, determine meeting times and figure out how the FLC would interface with GE redesign which was still in very much play. Once the new GE program was approved in February 2010, numerous questions emerged regarding the fate of existing GE courses and structures that had to be sorted out in order for the

FLC to function effectively. We had envisioned the Upper Division Themes in our current GE program as the sites for programmatic assessment. But faculty had many questions about the future of themes that had to be answered before proceeding with assessment efforts. Between furloughs, competing schedules and other issues, the FLC did not meet face-to-face until March 5, 2010. First order of business was to familiarize folks with the workings of an FLC and with GE assessment.

Since March, we have met weekly and have made significant progress in sorting out issues and approaches to GE assessment. We have set the bases for moving forward in an informed manner with implementing assessment processes that involve data collection, analysis and feedback to faculty. The document laying out the principles for GE program assessment represents a significant step forward towards a faculty-owned and faculty-endorsed approach to GE assessment that draws on national research and thinking on GE as well as the strengths of our particular campus community. Future plans for capitalizing on the advances made to date? To the extent possible, I would like to keep this group together in Fall 10 and move to the implementation phase, putting into practice some of the principles we have articulated. Personally, I am very much a proponent of "learning by doing" and feel that the proof of the true value of work will only be realized as we put principles into practice. If the system-wide Institute for Teaching and Learning views this as a productive investment of resources next academic year, we would welcome that support.

- **Kate McCarthy:** I appreciated this opportunity to work with colleagues from across the University on an issue that I have previously engaged only at the department level and with a high level of skepticism, if not cynicism. Learning more about GE assessment—through readings, discussion, webinar reports from other campuses, and my own exploration motivated by this process—has certainly helped me see the complexity of the assessment process, as well as its potential not only to improve student learning but also to re-engage faculty in conversations about issues that lie at the heart of our work. We are at a seizable moment on our campus as a new GE program moves from conception to implementation, and my greatest hope for an outcome of this FLC is that our work, so far admittedly modest in deliverables, will lay out principles, and ultimately processes if we are able to extend our group's work for another semester, for a faculty-driven, program-level GE assessment process that is flexible, manageable, and sustained by ongoing cross-disciplinary dialogue. I stand strongly behind the principle of "assessment for improvement," not "assessment for accountability," and believe making this evident in whatever plan finally emerges will be vital to faculty buy-in, especially at this moment in the life of the academy.
- **Jim Sager:** Though I have served as a member of the university's General Education Advisory Committee (GEAC) for two years, participation in the FLC has provided me with both an opportunity and the impetus to reflect in greater depth on the nature of GE assessment. While the FLC's work to date has focused primarily on practical matters, i.e., the mechanics of assessment,

my own reflections have been more concerned with what I view as a necessary shift in the culture of the university in order to facilitate assimilation of assessment into the GE program and into the daily life of the university.

Historically, "the management of a university gives minimal supervision to teaching and research by faculty, except when problems occur, or when a faculty member is being evaluated for promotion, tenure, or salary increases. The faculty are [sic] trusted to do their job competently and professionally. In return, the creative intellectuals on the faculty flourish in this atmosphere of minimal supervision. [...] Further, professors tend to work as individuals, not in "industrial-style teams." (Standler, 2000) In an age of assessment, however, professors need to adapt to an environment in which "teaching is not the solitary activity of an individual, but something that has to be seen in the context of a teaching team." (Andersson & Bendix, 2006) Movement towards and adoption of sustainable assessment-based instruction appears to require a significant paradigm shift that challenges both the way faculty think and the way they work.

While a formal, or perhaps ad-hoc, FLC will need to continue working to pilot test an assessment process for GE pathways, perhaps another task for such a learning community would be to develop a campus "assessment manifesto" that would serve as a catalyst for that necessary paradigm shift.

Standler, R. B., "Academic Freedom in the USA," Retrieved from: <http://www.rbs2.com/afree.htm>.

Anderson, R. and Bendix, L., "eXtreme teaching: A framework for continuous improvement." *Computer Science Education*, 16, 3, 2006, pp. 175-184.

- **Hope Smith:** As a new faculty member who is still learning about the assessment process, it was very helpful to meet with other faculty to learn about various techniques and strategies for GE assessment. It was also useful for me to meet faculty teaching GE courses in other areas, and to learn more about the GE program and its redesign. Although we discussed GE specifically, the ideas we generated will be useful for me in helping with assessment in my department. The FLC group accomplished quite a lot considering the short amount of time that we worked together. I agree with the other participants that we should continue to work together to strengthen our ideas and goals for GE assessment in the future.
- **Charley Turner:** As co-facilitator of this FLC, I found our conversations very helpful in thinking through the changes that we will need to make on this campus as we move from a GE assessment model based on the assessment of hundreds of individual courses toward a process that takes advantage of the increased coherence in our new GE Pathways program to focus on broad, programmatic assessment of GE student learning outcomes. We headed into this process knowing that there were many issues—some procedural, some substantive—to work through before we

could devise an assessment structure that will work for our entire GE program. Though we have certainly not solved all of the potential problems and pitfalls, I believe that we have, at the very least, identified many of them and thought through some possible solutions. It is our intention to share this document with both the General Education Advisory Committee and the General Education Implementation Team on our campus. This is how the FLC will make sure that these ideas and questions will reach the hands of the individuals on our campus responsible for implementing GE assessment in the future.

- **Eddie Vela:** I have had the honor and privilege to be part of this important transition on our campus. Reform of general education is a daunting and difficult process. I have been involved in most aspects of GE redesign on this campus, but only formally with respect to questions concerning assessment of GE. As a group we have reviewed some of the vast literature on this topic and shared individual perspectives on what can and/or should be done. My personal insight has grown substantially and I have come to better appreciate the longer term and unintentional implications and complications associated with the varied approaches to assess GE. The summary information included at the beginning of this report documents the basis of many of our discussions and I believe we are thus closer to an acceptable framework. The trick to find a balance between suggesting/prescribing a common template and/or approach to assessing GE while at the same time allowing for flexibility in how pathway coordinators/participants approach assessment. I believe all of us in this FLC understand the value and importance of assessment with regard to improving student learning, while at the same time mindful of the practical constraints in implementing a strategy. I believe we do have the beginning of a plan but we still require further study, and consultation and feedback from the campus community, especially the faculty involved in pathway construction and others tasked with GE assessment.

Example of what a pathway assessment matrix might look like:

Peace Pathway	Oral Communication	Written Communication	Critical Thinking	Mathematical Reasoning	Active Inquiry	Personal and Social Responsibility	Sustainability	Diversity	Creativity	Global Engagement
Foundation Connection: MATH 101				I		I				
Arts: ARTS 100 ARTH 101 THEA 110					I			I	I P I	
Humanities: ENGL 203 PHIL 101 RELS 100		I I	P I							
Individual & Society: ECON 103 SOC 100 WMST 170	I						I		I	I
Societal Institutions: ANTH 112 GEOG 102 HIST 103		I P	I			P				P
Learning for Life: CHLD 252 HCSV 160 RECR 180										
UD Humanities: MCGS 324 PHIL 327 ENGL 374	I		P					P I		
UD Social Sciences: GEOG 352 HCSV 325 SOC 354		D				D		P		D I
UD Sciences: GEOS 350 PSSC 390 BIOL 345			D			D D D				

I = introduce, P = practice, D = demonstrate competence