



M E M O R A N D U M

TO: Sandra Flake, Provost

FROM: GEAC

SUBJECT: GEAC “Meta-Analysis” of Assessment Reports and Faculty Perceptions

DATE: Wednesday, April 02, 2008

At the beginning of AY 2007-08, you asked GEAC to conduct a broad-based review of Chico State’s GE program. The intent of this report is to summarize our efforts to date and to make recommendations about the future. We kept in mind your stated goals to use this report in part to start a campus-wide conversation about what faculty, students, and staff feel are the “hallmarks” of GE in such areas as program structure, the review process, student learning, and teaching. The questions we hope to answer are:

- What course reviews have been done? What other assessments has GEAC been involved with?
- What have the results been of those reviews? That is, what are students learning in GE?
- What conclusions have we reached about GE, the course review process, student learning, and teaching? What have we learned from all these reviews?
- What changes would we suggest based on the above?
- What recommendations do we have for the future?

What course reviews have been done? What other assessments has GEAC been involved with?

Per the MOU on the Administration of General Education Policy (<http://www.csuchico.edu/vpaa/manual/MOU.pdf>), GEAC evaluates courses in GE periodically to ensure that courses meet GE goals and that faculty conduct assessment of student learning. To review the committee’s previous assessment work, each member reviewed 10 course reports from each of the following areas:

- A and B
- C1 and C3
- C2
- D1 and D2
- D3 and E
- UDT A-F
- UDT G-N
- UDT O-U

We asked these questions of each:

1. When was GEAC review initiated/completed?
2. Did the assessment plan connect course learning goals to GE goals?
3. What type of assessment was conducted: Direct; Embedded; Indirect; Special Purpose?
4. Did the assessment data demonstrate that student learning took place?
5. Did faculty reflect on or interpret the assessment results?

6. Did they make changes to the course based on their results?

Some members of GEAC have also been involved in the General Education Program-Level Assessment of Writing, Oral Communication, Quantitative Reasoning, and Critical Thinking. This was a two-year project involving GEAC personnel, but carried out largely outside of the typical GEAC review process. However, it did respond to the process outlined in the MOU on General Education that calls for periodic review of GE as a program (as opposed to area-by-area course reviews). The program review focused on the core domains of General Education: writing, oral communications, critical thinking and quantitative reasoning, all of which are supposed to be integrated across the GE curriculum (*pace* EM 99-05). A more or less common methodology was pursued in assessing each of these domains, with faculty consultation at each step: (1) a small “task force,” including membership of GEAC, AURA and faculty with disciplinary expertise in each particular domain, was created to assess each of these domains across GE; (2) student learning outcomes for each domain were identified; (3) rubrics were created to assess student performance on the SLOs; (4) faculty who teach in relevant GE courses were asked to participate in the assessment effort on a voluntary basis; (5) faculty participants identified assignments in their courses where the SLOs in question were evinced; (6) student work from the assignment identified was collected to assess student performance; (7) teams were convened to assess student work, after review of assignments, rubrics and some efforts at calibration to strengthen inter-rater reliability; (8) student work was assessed, and; (9) results were analyzed, written up and presented at a variety of forums (Academic Senate, Chairs Council, CELT conference).

GEAC’s participation in the program review was ad-hoc, organized largely outside the routine activities of GEAC. It was the first time a program-level assessment of GE had been completed.

What have the results been of those assessments?

Results from this review of assessments indicate several things.

First, faculty are strongly invested in the courses they teach in the GE program. They regularly reflect on their teaching and make changes to syllabi and assignments based on both feedback from students and innovations in their fields. More specifically:

- **Assessment plans** submitted to GEAC generally connected student learning outcomes to the overall goals of the GE program. Faculty seemed to develop outcomes related to writing, communication skills, knowledge of language and literature, cultures and societies, and critical thinking more frequently than they did those from other areas.
- **Assessment methods** favored indirect over direct assessments of outcomes. Some faculty collected exams, quizzes, and writing assignments to assess SLOs directly, but significantly more used Likert-type surveys to measure student perceptions of the course or the subjects in it.
- **Assessment data**, with some exceptions, did not convincingly demonstrate that student learning took place. Results of direct assessments did show student growth in content and skills; results of indirect assessments were likewise nearly always positive or strongly positive. But because faculty often chose surveys over direct assessment methods, conclusions they reached about what students actually learned (instead of what they felt they learned) often seemed unsupported. More than a few assessment surveys did not include results at all.

- **Faculty reflected** on the direct and indirect assessment results they gathered both regularly and thoroughly. Numerous reports narrated the process faculty took when interpreting results, inferred about causes for low or high scores, linked present assessments to past efforts, and compared scores on different SLOs.
- **Changes were made** to courses after careful consideration of assessment results. Faculty described major and minor changes to the content, organization, assignments, or presentation of material, said that they would attempt to reduce class size, or noted other meaningful steps to increase learning.

From this review, it seems clear that faculty believe that reflection about course content and organization and frequent revisions to a class are integral parts of teaching. They seem less invested in the assessment process as a mechanism to achieve either reflection or improvement. As seems clear from the above, faculty will engage in both reflection and improvement whether the assessments that were supposed to support them were direct or indirect, and indeed whether any assessment had taken place at all.

Please see the appendix for a numerical breakdown of our findings.

What conclusions have we reached about GE from these reviews?

On the basis of our review of years of GE course reports, several findings about student learning, teaching, and the assessment process have emerged.

Student learning. The course assessment process that GEAC currently uses does not enable us to draw general conclusions about what students have learned in GE or the quality of that learning. Most of what we know has come from faculty descriptions that did not adequately spell out how student learning changed or developed as a result of the assessment process. Faculty most frequently reported that students felt they gained in their “substantive knowledge” of a content area, knowledge of a language or its rules, critical thinking ability, and understanding and appreciation of the arts. Students also reported high levels of satisfaction with their knowledge (These survey reports contrast sharply with the anecdotal reports we have about student perceptions of GE as a whole, which indicate that they often see GE as “hoops to jump through” or requirements to “get over with.”). But the reports largely did not focus in on the quality of student learning or provide faculty with much of an exigency to substantively change their courses in order to improve it.

Part of this seems due to the overuse of indirect assessments, which tell us little about whether and how student learning objectives are actually met. We will address this issue below.

Another issue has to do with the individualized nature of course-level assessment. Since faculty design SLO’s and assessment plans course by course, we could not compare the quality or amount of learning in one course to that in any other.

The specific conclusions we can draw of student learning in GE come from the GE program assessments of core skills that were conducted the last two years. Results of the joint GEAC-AURA faculty-led GE Program review (described above) presented a variety of insights into student learning in GE. In the domain of **oral communication**, it was evident that within GE courses, students had few opportunities (beyond the specified oral communications courses, CMST 131, 132) to practice

oral communications skills. Consequently, oral communications skills, as measured, actually declined as students progressed in their academic careers. In **writing** and **critical thinking**, the opposite trend was noted: student performance among seniors was significantly stronger than among first-year students. Still, the results were somewhat disappointing particularly with regard to students' reasoning skills, as measured. With reference to **quantitative reasoning**, as in oral communications, there seemed to be little opportunity for students to practice these skills in GE outside of required math courses. Performance on math tasks in these required courses was generally satisfactory, but the dearth of mathematical reasoning elsewhere in GE generated concern that (as with oral communications) for at least some students, their quantitative skills may actually decline over time, due to lack of practice.

While this initial attempt at GE Program review had some flaws, there was a general consensus among those involved, and those that discussed the results, that the methodology pursued was defensible. The weakest aspect of the review has been in following up to involve faculty in discussion of these results and to "close the loop" with some real changes to the GE program. There are encouraging aspects of this type of activity, but these have largely been isolated efforts without a sustained institutional focus.

Teaching. A good deal of the work in assessment reports seemed to focus on teaching, not learning. Generally faculty were eloquent describing the context of a particular course: its evolution, approaches to teaching it, changes in course content or student populations, and so on. The courses themselves seem excellent: intriguing, deep, meaningful, occasionally interdisciplinary. Course activities generally offer a useful mix of lecture and discussion and theory and application. The range of courses in GE is an indicator of the breadth of faculty interest and their desire to take their research into the classroom.

Changes to teaching fell into broad categories. Some faculty made changes to the subject matter of the course, such as increasing time on class, gender, and ethnicity issues, increasing conceptual content, or using more current events. Others reported technical changes, such as putting GE goals on syllabi or changing the course focus to connect better to the GE program. The majority of reports we read described faculty changes to pedagogy, as in the arrangement of material, the use of quizzes, workbooks, and writing assignments, or the number of oral presentations.

The course review process. The process now in place seems to yield rich descriptions of faculty teaching methods and their perception of the effects of those methods. Faculty narrate their understandings of subject matter, or the evolution of course content over several years, and in doing so place their work within the context of the GE program. Faculty also seem to make a good faith effort at conducting useful assessment, having received little to no formal training or feedback from GEAC or other groups (AURA might be an exception). Despite this, the course review process generally does not tell us about student learning.

Indirect assessments tell faculty about student perceptions of their own learning and their overall satisfaction with GE courses. Faculty do a good job reading the surveys in order to draw conclusions about teaching and the pedagogical changes they may want to make. But the process of deriving meaning from surveys requires more than a little interpretation. Usually faculty take a handful of survey questions and average the scores, looking for discrepant numbers. But does a 3.8 average out of 5 mean changes are needed? If scores were all 4 or better, is that a success? Few faculty

described how they arrived at their answers, so surveys and survey numbers do not seem at all clear-cut.

As we read GE course reports the question that arose frequently concerned what the “value added” for course assessment was. Based on our review of course reports, we have little faith that assessment is leveraging actual changes in teaching and learning, rather than just in assessment practices. As noted above, instructors reflect on their courses and make useful changes to them quite frequently—whether or not they have engaged in what we consider “assessment.” Thus changes in teaching and learning in GE seem not to be motivated or shaped very meaningfully by the assessment process.

The review process also does not seem to be a useful mechanism to manage the size or shape of the GE program. In the past, courses that did not do regular assessment or turn in full reports were given multiple extensions until those documents came in and were (very) minimally complete. It was only in rare cases, or at the request of faculty themselves, that a course was decertified for lack of assessment. The committee does not believe that lack of adequate assessment should be the sole criterion by which courses are removed from GE, or its presence the only reason to keep them: decisions about the content of GE should focus on the content of courses and their relationship to the goals of the GE program. But perhaps as a consequence of adopting this mindset, the committee has allowed Area C and D both to exceed the number of courses suggested by EM 99-05 and the MOU. If the size of the GE Program is a concern to the campus, the review process is not a mechanism for managing it.

GEAC. Because GEAC focuses almost exclusively on assessment, it rarely focuses on questions about overall student learning, excellence in teaching, or the content or shape of the GE program. There is currently no committee or body on campus that might take a broader, more inclusive perspective on GE: AURA focused on assessment in majors and programs, and the Dean of UED provides some informal oversight and coordination of the program. Overall, it seems that because of the heavy “paper load” of assessment reports, there is little or no time on GEAC to do important work related to the current and future shape of the program.

These conclusions are largely confirmed by faculty from across campus. As part of an effort two years ago to solicit feedback from faculty about GEAC and the review process, we conducted focus-group interviews with Chairs, TT faculty, and lecturers in each college. When asked what they thought were the negative aspects of GE review efforts on campus, faculty listed a number of issues, including:

- Too much attention paid to details and not enough to overall assessment
- Wrong questions are being asked
- It is an onerous, time consuming cumbersome process
- GEAC should spend more effort on reflection and less on enforcement
- Process has too much emphasis on “nuts and bolts”
- Consider the broad GE mission in evaluation
- Too much nit-picking versus evaluation of the big picture
- GEAC provides little positive feedback for all the work faculty put in
- There is no obvious use of all the accumulated data

- GEAC only addresses what is wrong
- There is no reinforcement for reward for jobs well done
- Review process is viewed as so frustrating that good courses have just been dropped

In our meetings with faculty across campus, comments like the above vastly outweighed more positive comments about GEAC or the review process.

Curriculum. Because course assessment does not directly target curriculum, questions also remain about the overall shape and direction of the GE program. To what extent is our program built on what faculty want to teach rather than what the campus community feels is most important in terms of learning? Is the program at all constrained by “legacy courses” that are only taught because they used to be taught by others? GEAC is not currently in a position to answer these questions.

What recommendations do we have for the future?

Based on our review, GEAC recommends several changes be made to the structure and content of General Education. The first group of recommendations emerges directly from our review of course reports:

- GEAC should develop a course review process that focuses solely on student learning (instead of teaching) and encourages faculty to see ongoing assessment as a key aspect of good teaching in GE. At the same time, the process should reflect and reward faculty buy-in.

One useful strategy for achieving both of these goals would be to develop standing subcommittees of faculty for each Area in the GE program. These subcommittees would be charged with:

- 1) Developing student learning outcomes for all courses in the Area;
 - 2) Communicating with faculty in the Area on a regular basis about assessment;
 - 3) Highlighting courses in which exceptional teaching, learning, or assessment goes on; and
 - 4) Regulating the number and kind of courses in that Area.
- Rotating workshops should be established that focus on pedagogical innovation in GE, covering topics such as effective teaching of critical thinking, enhanced writing instruction, incorporation of quantitative reasoning in GE, active learning, and other topics designed to enhance student learning and faculty satisfaction in GE courses.
 - GEAC should continue to periodically review overall program effectiveness using methods such as program-level assessment.

The recommendations below emerge from GEAC’s ongoing work with and study of the GE program as a whole:

- This report should be widely shared on campus to encourage faculty, staff, and student conversations about GE.
- The GE Program should be reviewed and revised. First, an external consultant should be brought in to review the GE program. With some revisions, this report could serve as a

guiding or preliminary document for that review.

Next, an all-campus task force should be convened to revise EM 99-05, a process that the MOU mandates for the end of every review cycle. The task force should take the recommendations from the external consultant as their starting point.

Finally, a separate committee or task force, either standing or ad hoc with a limited duration, should be convened to examine the curriculum and pedagogy of the GE program to make recommendations to the Provost and faculty regarding GE reform/renewal. One strategy would be to implement a survey of current student and alumni perceptions of GE.

- GEAC should propose ways to officially recognize best practices in GE, such as:
 - 1) Establishing awards for faculty teaching in GE;
 - 2) Featuring award faculty on panels at CELT;
 - 3) Highlighting model courses and assessments as “case studies” on the GE website; and
 - 4) Publicity that would encourage senior faculty to teach in lower-division GE.
- GEAC should regularly consult with stakeholders in GE—faculty, students, alumni, administrators, employers, and others—regarding ways to enhance its effectiveness.

As always, GEAC remains invested in making the GE program more coherent, meaningful, streamlined, and accountable to the university as a whole. We look forward to hearing your feedback and to continuing this much-needed conversation.

APPENDIX:
Brief Overview of Fall 2007 GEAC Course Review

(N of reports read = 80)

1. Course Number, Name:
2. GE (sub-) Area:
3. Date (semester/year) GEAC review was initiated:
4. Date (semester/year) GEAC review was completed:

5. Did the assessment plan connect course learning goals to GE goals?

56 yes 20 no

Comments indicated that faculty who developed SLOs targeted specific Core and Area goals; those who didn't usually failed to link goals adequately to GE or failed to spell out goals specifically enough to be assessable.

6. Type of assessment conducted:

43 Direct 50 Embedded
68 Indirect 32 Special purpose

Comments showed that Likert-scale surveys and pre/post surveys were very popular indirect assessments; direct assessments focused on quizzes, tests, short answer, and essay assignments. Examples of not doing assessment included faculty using SETs, "gauging the tenor of class discussion," or not even attempting it at all.

7. Did the assessment data demonstrate that student learning took place?

29 yes 49 no

Some faculty reached useful conclusions about student learning; of this group many did not discuss how they reached their conclusions about what constituted substantial progress or development. A larger group of reports did not demonstrate that learning took place. They used indirect assessments, so reached conclusions about perceptions of student learning rather than the learning itself, or they included no data at all.

8. Did faculty reflect on or interpret the assessment results?

58 yes 17 no

Reflections encompassed every aspect of the course: teaching, learning, assignments, homework, setup, technology, exams and quizzes, etc. When reflections weren't present, usually it was because there were no data or results to report.

9. Did they make changes to the course based on their results?

46 yes

30 no

[2 not sure]

Changes encompassed every aspect of the course: teaching, learning, assignments, homework, setup, technology, exams and quizzes, etc. Comments indicated that “no” votes usually meant reports had left this section out or had not listed specific changes the faculty had made.

[If needed, a fuller qualitative description of our findings is available.]