General Education Feasibility Study

Fall 2007

The University of Arizona and the University-Wide General Education Committee (UWGEC) are engaged in on-going efforts to evaluate and improve the quality of the undergraduate education offered at the university. In fall 2006, a Leadership Team on Outcomes Assessment (LTOA) was convened by the Provost's Office and charged with developing successful partnerships with individuals on campus who support the operations of outcomes assessment efforts.   The ultimate goal was to identify strategies that lead to continuous improvement of the teaching and learning experience for students and to provide a recommendation for assessment at the University that is meaningful, manageable, and sustainable. The group was also asked to provide input to the campus community and to central administration regarding external (e.g., accreditation, ABOR) calls for data to demonstrate that students are achieving the institutions' learning goals

During spring 2007, the LTOA designed a feasibility study to identify an embedded, seamless, minimally unobtrusive process for assessing student learning outcomes associated with the general education program. The expected outcome of the study was to determine if course-embedded assessment would work in a sample of general education courses during fall 2007. The long-term goal was to develop a model for course-embedded assessment that could be used in general education courses and across various programs and disciplines as well.

After much discussion about sampling, the decision was made to identify six Tier One courses (two from Natural Sciences, two from Individuals and Societies, and two from Humanities) and have LTOA members contact the instructors of those courses for participation. Participation involved having the instructors develop or refine a class assignment that provides students the opportunity to demonstrate mastery of one or more general education learning outcomes. Participants were advised that their assignment need not meet all the strand objectives but perhaps will focus on one or two of the outcomes. Participants were given the strand specific and overall general education learning outcomes and were asked to identify which of the outcomes their assignment addressed. Six general education classes were subsequently identified.

Participating instructors agreed to provide a random sample of assignments to the LTOA for scoring independent of grading that would occur in class.   During summer 2007, several LTOA members designed rubrics that would be used to score assignments. Drafts of the rubrics were forwarded to participating instructors for their input and suggestions. Rich discussions regarding scaling and utility among the LTOA members and feedback from the instructors guided the refinement of the rubrics. The Team decided that a group of graduate students would be trained on the use of the rubrics and paid to score the assignments.

About mid-semester in fall 2007, the University's Learning Technologies Center (LTC), in agreement with the LTOA, used the D2L course management system to collect a sample of

assignments. A number of instructors did not use D2L so paper collection was necessary. One of the LTOA's goals was to have the process be as unobtrusive as possible for instructors.

Findings

- The assignment collection process proved cumbersome and time consuming, especially where paper was involved. The Team decided that electronic submissions would be standard for future projects

- There was wide variation in the assignments in terms of length and content. After much discussion about the assignments, the Team concluded that context and content knowledge was necessary in order to assess the assignments using the rubrics that had been developed for the study.

- Given the labor intensive nature and estimated costs of getting the assignments scored, the Team decided to take on the task of scoring a sample of the assignments using the revised rubric.

- The rubrics, as designed, were extremely difficult to use with the assignments that were collected. The Team decided to focus attention on writing exclusively. During fall 2007, a writing rubric (see Appendix A) was developed and used to score a sample of assignments. Discussion of the rubric's suitability centered around disciplinary bias and the need for norming sessions prior to use in the future. It was agreed that the rubric will be tested by using it to score assignments that are collected during spring 2008.

Appendix A

Rubric for Assessing Writing in General Education
Adapted from the GRE Analytical Writing rubric

Score: 5
   Displays strong analytical writing, including:
- Provides thoughtful analysis of complex ideas.
- Develops and supports main points with logically sound reasons and/or well-chosen examples.
- Is well focused and well organized.
- Uses sentence variety and vocabulary to convey meaning clearly.
- Demonstrates good control of sentence structure and language usage but may have minor errors that do not interfere with meaning

Score: 4
   Displays generally strong writing, including:
- Provides competent analysis of complex ideas.
- Develops and supports main points with relevant reasons and/or examples.
- Is adequately organized.
- Conveys meaning with reasonable clarity
- Demonstrates satisfactory control of sentence structure and language usage but may have minor errors that do not interfere with meaning.

Score: 3
   Displays competence in analytical writing, including:
- Has a central idea, but with limited analysis or development.
- Some organization problems.
- Some problems with sentence structure or language usage.
- Some errors that result in vagueness or lack of clarity.

Score: 2
   Displays serious weakness in analytical writing. The writing is seriously flawed in at least one of the following ways:
- Serious lack of analysis or development
- Weak organization.
- Serious and frequent problems in sentence structure or language usage, with errors that obscure meaning.

Score: 1
   Displays fundamental deficiencies in analytical writing. The writing is fundamentally flawed in at least one of the following ways:
- Content that is extremely confusing or mostly irrelevant to the assigned task.
- Little or no development.
- Severe and pervasive errors that result in incoherence