4. GENERAL EDUCATION PROGRAM ASSESSMENT PLAN

4A. PROPOSAL (*University Handbook*, Chapter 7, Section 2)

GENERAL EDUCATION ASSESSMENT

The assessment of student learning in the General Education curriculum will be the responsibility of the General Education Committee. Assessment within the General Education Program is intended to be a formal process of inquiry into student learning. More than simply an exercise in documenting the level of student achievement within the program, assessment is an exploration of how and why students learn, or fail to learn, within a particular curricular and pedagogical context. It explores both the outcomes that students achieve as well as the processes through which they learn. In this way, assessment should be viewed as an open-ended scholarly activity, a collaborative action research project aimed at the improvement of teaching and learning. (For a detailed explanation of the theory underpinning this approach to assessment, see Peggy Maki, *Assessing for Learning: Building a Sustainable Commitment Across the Institution*, Second Edition (2010), 123-153.)

The evaluation of student learning in the General Education curriculum will be the responsibility of the General Education Committee (GEC). The role of the committee in this regard shall be to:

1. recommend policies and procedures for General Education assessment to the Faculty Senate;
2. facilitate the process by which General Education assessment data is gathered, evaluated, and communicated;
    a. assist departments and faculty to identify, develop, and utilize course-level assessment measures;
    b. identify, develop, and utilize institutional level measures in concert with the Assessment Subcommittee and the Office of Policy Analysis and Planning;
3. make recommendations to Faculty Senate regarding improvements to the General Education Program;
4. support instructional development and curricular improvements;
5. review and update the General Education assessment process regularly.

Assessment of student learning within the General Education curriculum will take place on a five-year cycle. The first four years of the cycle will be focused on courses in the four levels of the curriculum. In addition, during each of the first four years, information will be gathered related to one of the four General Education Program Outcomes from courses in the Investigation Level. Based on these results, the fifth year of the Assessment Cycle will be devoted to a comprehensive review of the General Education Program and Assessment Plan.

Year 1:

- Foundation-Level Courses (First Year Seminar, Written and Oral Communication, Quantitative Literacy, and Wellness)
- Program Outcome 1 (Demonstrate critical thinking, quantitative, and communication skills necessary to succeed in a rapidly changing global society)

Year 2:

- Investigation-Level Courses (Arts, Humanities, Historical Perspectives, Social Sciences, and Natural Sciences)
- Program Outcome 2 (Demonstrate broad knowledge of the physical, social, and cultural worlds as well as the methods by which this knowledge is produced)

Year 3:

- Cultural and Environmental Awareness-Level Courses (Global Awareness, U.S. Diversity, and Environmental Responsibility)
- Program Outcome 3 (Recognize that responsible global citizenship involves personal accountability, social equity, and environmental sustainability)

Year 4:

- Integration-Level Courses (Interdisciplinary Studies, Experiential Learning, Communication in the Major, and Capstone Experience in the Major)
- Program Outcome 4 (Apply their knowledge and skills, working in interdisciplinary ways to solve problems)

Year 5:

- Comprehensive Review of General Education Program and Assessment Plan

Evidence of student achievement will be collected along three dimensions: (a) course-based measurements for each GEP level utilizing course portfolios compiled by instructors, (b) institutional-level measurements conducted through periodic standardized tests and surveys administered by the Office of Policy Analysis and Planning and (c) course-based measurements for each of the four GE Program Outcomes, potentially utilizing course portfolios and departmental assessment. Each year, this information will be reviewed and evaluated by faculty learning communities under the direction of the GEC, the Director of General Education, and the Assessment Coordinator. In turn, the GEC will annually report these results and its recommendations for improving the General Education Program to the Faculty Senate, the Provost, the Deans, and others.

Course-Based Measurements

The GEC will regularly gather course-level information on student learning through the collection of course portfolios. A course portfolio is a selection of materials from a given course—including the syllabus and relevant examples of student work—along with reflective statements written by the instructor that explore how the course structures and assessment strategies contributed to student learning. Faculty members teaching designated General

Education courses will be required to prepare a course portfolio according to the five-year cycle noted above. (Note: the GEC will consult with departments offering multiple sections of the same GEP course to establish a plan for assessment; such a plan will specify a subset of instructors/sections who will submit course portfolios.) Each course portfolio will contain the following elements:

1. Course Information:
    a. A syllabus, including an explanation of how the intended learning outcomes of the course align with those of the General Education Program category.
    b. A brief narrative describing how the relevant General Education learning outcomes will be met by students through course experiences, assignments, and/or activities.
2. Assessment Information:
    a. A discipline-appropriate evaluation of student attainment of at least one learning outcome, including a brief explanation of how student learning was assessed. (Note: Although courses should be *designed* to meet all the approved learning outcomes in a particular category, the actual *assessment* can and should focus on a smaller subset of these outcomes.)
    b. Examples of student work related to the evaluation above showing a range of student achievement.
    c. The specific criteria or rubric that was used to evaluate student work.
    d. Results of any other feedback mechanisms used in the course that explore student perceptions of course assignments and their alignment with the general education learning outcomes.
    e. A brief statement explaining how assessment results will be used to improve learning in the course in the future.

<u>The General Education Assessment Process</u>

The annual process of evaluating student learning within the General Education curriculum will have the following steps:

1. At the beginning of each academic year, the GEC will establish faculty learning communities for each area of the curriculum being assessed during that year. Each faculty learning community will include 4-6 faculty members teaching courses in the categories under review and includes the Assessment Coordinator and a member of the GEC representing the particular GEP category. The faculty learning community will coordinate with faculty across campus to ensure the body of course portfolios will provide adequate evidence of student learning for each of the learning outcomes in the GEP category.
2. Instructors teaching courses in areas under review in the fall semester will prepare and submit course portfolios to the Assessment Coordinator by February 1
3. Each faculty learning community will review course portfolios provided by the Assessment Coordinator and provide feedback to instructors. This feedback will only be shared with the instructor.
4. The Assessment Coordinator will collaborate with the faculty learning communities to aggregate findings from the course portfolios, along with data from the Office of

Policy Analysis and Planning, and prepare a report for the General Education Committee by May 1. No information identifying instructors, students or specific courses shall be included in the report.

5. At the beginning of the next academic year, the GEC will report to the Faculty Senate on its assessment of student learning, including any recommendations to improve the curriculum. The report may also recommend further action research projects to investigate particular aspects of student learning or to explore the impact of particular changes to the curriculum. The report must be submitted to the Senate by November 1. This report will be shared with the Provost, the Deans, and the department chairs. In addition, it will be posted online to be available to the campus community and others.

Institutional-Level Measurements

The Office of Policy Analysis and Planning will regularly administer standardized tests and student surveys in an effort to measure student learning and experiences on campus. The Office of Policy Analysis and Planning will work with the GEC, the Director of General Education, and the Assessment Coordinator to share results that are applicable and useful for assessment within the General Education Program. These tests will include those institutional-level assessments required for external accountability or reporting.

Given that such measurements provide an institutional snapshot of student learning, the results will be utilized by the GEC in concert with other data gathered through course-based assessment.

The Use of Assessment Results

Assessment results are intended for two purposes: 1) to provide feedback to individual instructors to assist in their efforts to improve student learning within their courses; and 2) to make judgments about the effectiveness of the General Education Program and to inform recommendations for its improvement. To achieve these aims, assessment results will be shared in the following manner:

1. Each instructor submitting a course portfolio will receive individual feedback from the faculty learning community, including an evaluation of the assessment method utilized in the course and recommendations for the improvement of student learning. This evaluation will include the rubric used by the faculty learning community in forming its opinions. This information will be provided only to the instructors themselves and will not be shared with departments, Deans, the Provost, or the GEC.
2. Working in concert with the faculty learning communities, the Assessment Coordinator will compile reports on student learning for the GEC, removing references to specific courses and instructors. The GEC's final report will contain:
    a. A summary of student attainment of the learning outcomes in the relevant General Education areas.
    b. Recommendations based on these assessment results for the improvement of the General Education curriculum. These recommendations may include proposals for further action research projects related to particular courses, GEP categories, GE Program Outcomes, or specific groups of students.

3. The GEC will report annually to the Faculty Senate sharing its evaluation and recommendations with the Provost, the Deans, and the department chairs. The report will also be posted online to be available to the campus community and others.
4. In conjunction with the Director of General Education and the Assessment Coordinator, the GEC will work with various units on campus in order to provide professional development opportunities for faculty and staff. In this manner, the GEC will help to "close the loop" by allowing assessment of student learning lead to curricular and pedagogical improvements. Such professional development opportunities might include:
    a. Workshops on effective assessment of student learning in the General Education curriculum.
    b. Instructional development necessitated by Faculty Senate-approved changes to the curriculum or learning outcomes.
    c. Action research projects intended to provide further information on student learning within the curriculum.

4B: EXPLANATION

UWSP has little history of assessing student learning in the current General Degree Requirements (GDRs). Responsibility for this task resides with the Assessment Subcommittee, but unfortunately, the subcommittee's workload makes it virtually impossible to carry out a comprehensive system of assessment for the GDRs. In addition, given the divided authority over the GDRs within the governance structure, there has been little formal opportunity to use any information that might be gathered to improve the general education curriculum, or in other words, to "close the loop."

This oversight was noted by the Higher Learning Commission (HLC), our institutional accrediting agency, in its most recent report on UWSP, and it was among the principal factors that led the Faculty Senate to create a new General Education Program. Consequently, as UWSP now looks to complete the final steps in creating this program, members of the campus must address how student learning will be assessed. The proposal above and explanation below is a result of a coordinated effort of the UWSP Assessment Academy Team, Assessment Subcommittee, and GEPRC.

Overview of Assessment

The term "assessment" refers to student learning, not the performance of the instructor. The assessment of student learning is an omnipresent part of teaching in that faculty are assessing learning all the time, not only by assigning grades at regular intervals through the administration of tests and assignments, but also by making informal evaluations of learning during every course session and even from moment to moment. Unfortunately, this kind of assessment does not always provide the types of information necessary to allow instructors to make improvements in teaching strategies. For example, if an instructor knows that the average grade on an exam is 82%, this does not facilitate the improvement of teaching in a focused area. By contrast, if an instructor knows that students are struggling with a particular concept, skill, or ability, then this allows the instructor to identify a specific area that can be improved. In this way, a more detailed approach to assessment (beyond assigning grades) is required for closing the loop and continuously improving teaching and learning.

<u>Learning Outcomes</u>

Usually, this more detailed assessment takes of the form of learning outcomes assessment; that is, building assignments and courses around a set of learning outcomes that are intentionally aligned to the intended learning outcomes of a program of study or of the GEC. Then, faculty can establish criteria for determining acceptable levels of performance based on the learning outcomes. An instructor who has identified the individual components of an assignment in this way can then evaluate student achievement in a more detailed, focused way. The term "rubric" refers to one example of a formal process of identifying the criteria upon which an assignment (course or program) will be evaluated and articulating different levels of achievement for each learning outcome (e.g., from low to high, acceptable to exceptional).

For example, suppose that an English instructor is offering a course that satisfies the Written Communication GEP category. If she has identified the development of a thesis statement as an

important learning outcome for a writing assignment, she can provide a separate assessment of that aspect of the assignment. If she determines that students are struggling with this aspect of the written assignment, she can address this in terms of making adjustments in her approach to teaching, thus supporting improved student learning.

Consider another example: suppose that a Biology instructor is offering a course that aligns with the learning outcomes of the Natural Sciences GEP category. If she has identified a learning outcome that includes knowledge of the various aspects of cell division, then she might develop a rubric for assessing student achievement with respect to cell division. If students are not learning what the instructor has identified as an important skill, knowledge, or ability, then she can make adjustments in her teaching that will lead to greater student learning in the area that the instructor has determined to be important.

Engaging in this assessment feedback loop is something that instructors already do, at least on an implicit, intuitive level. Many instructors use rubrics, at least to some extent. While they are not obligatory for assessment, rubrics make the process of closing the loop easier for the instructor, and they provide students with more meaningful, specific, and formative feedback (rather than just summative feedback such as points or a grade).

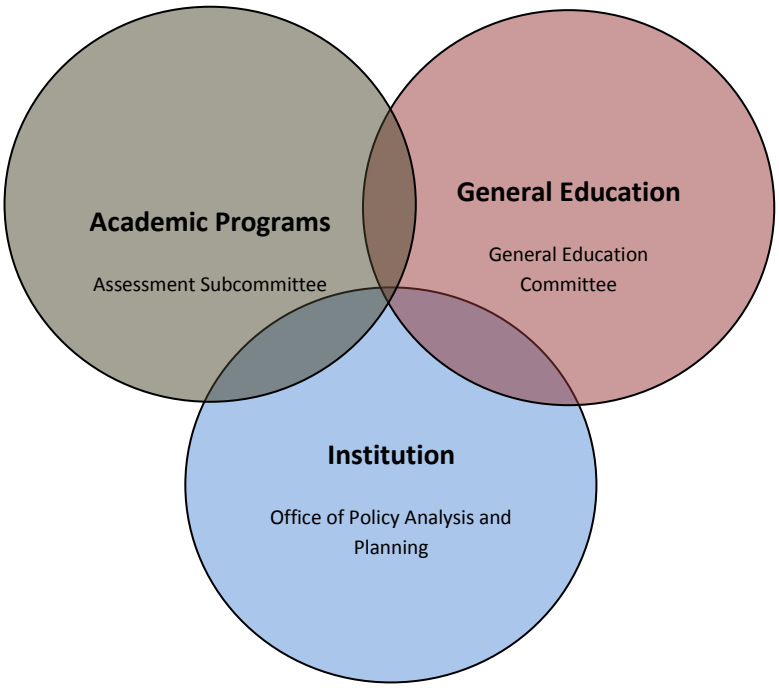
Colleague Conversations

Instructors also engage in this process of continuous improvement when speaking to each other informally, say, in the hallways, over coffee, or during other informal conversations on campus. These are extremely rewarding conversations, and they lead to improvements in the teaching and learning cycle within our individual courses and curricula. Such conversations also contribute to the overall collegiality of departments and programs, as well as a culture of sharing and mutual support among instructors.

It is important to note, however, that when addressing the common learning outcomes of a shared curriculum (say, the curriculum within a department, a major, or a program), it is valuable to engage in a more formal, explicit process of assessment and continuous improvement. This process will allow instructors to share their ideas publicly and to coordinate their efforts between classes so that students are able to get the best support and guidance we can offer. In the context of departments, majors, and programs, instructors are usually “housed” together as colleagues and have offices in the same place. So, when the “unit of analysis” for assessment is a common, shared curriculum (not just a single assignment or a single course), it makes sense to coordinate our efforts in a public, formal process that facilitates coordination, discussion, and support to ensure that students are meeting the outcomes that have been intended for their learning.

This same insight applies to the General Education Program. Just as it makes sense to coordinate our assessment efforts within a department or program, we must also coordinate our efforts within the GEP through a public, formal process. This is all the more important because instructors in this curriculum are scattered across campus and not typically housed together in the same space. Our General Education Assessment Plan is intended to create exactly this kind of shared, collaborative, and formal process of evaluating student learning.

Oversight of Assessment



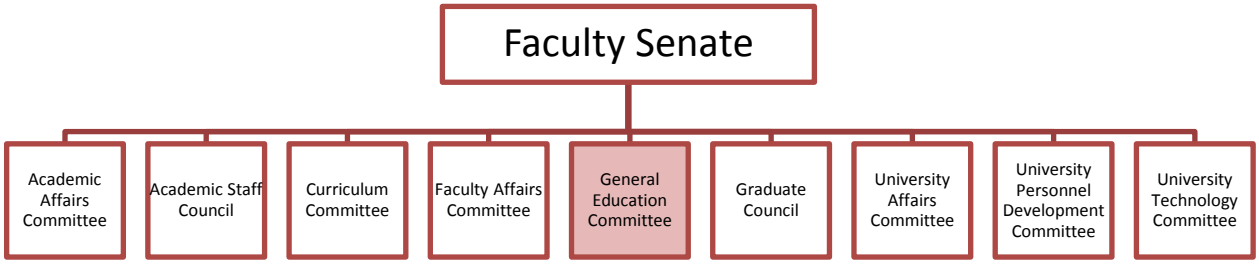
Assessment at UWSP

Assessment at UWSP must take place within a clearly-defined structure. Toward that end, program-level assessment will be carried out by academic departments who report to the Assessment Subcommittee; the assessment of general education, meanwhile, will be the responsibility of the General Education Committee, described below; and finally, institutional-level assessment (which will inform the work of both the Assessment Subcommittee and the General Education Committee) will be administered by the Office of Policy Analysis and Planning. In addition, the university will facilitate a variety of faculty- and staff-led development efforts to support assessment. The key to the success of this structure is the intentional coordination of all these efforts, all centered on a model of continuous improvement with student learning as the focus.

<u>Governance</u>

Under the present governance structure, the Assessment Subcommittee, with the aid of the Office of Policy Analysis and Planning, is entirely responsible for the assessment of general education. This includes not only the collection and analysis of assessment data, but the use of this information as well. In practice, the Assessment Subcommittee has been unable to manage general education assessment on top of its responsibility for overseeing assessment in department-level academic programs.

The General Education Committee—a new standing committee of the Faculty Senate meant to replace the current GDR Subcommittee—has been created to assume responsibility for overseeing all aspects of the general education curriculum: the approval of courses for general education credit, the assessment of student learning within the curriculum, and the subsequent improvement of the curriculum based on assessment results.



Much as a department manages its own program(s), the new General Education Committee (GEC) will play the pivotal role in managing the general education curriculum.

- The committee will be responsible for designating courses as meeting general education learning outcomes, a procedure that must include specific discussion of how courses will be assessed in relation to those outcomes.
- The committee will then be responsible for collaborating with others to gather assessment evidence. This includes both course-based assessment data gathered from instructors and also institutional-level assessment data gathered by the Office of Policy Analysis and Planning through the administration of standardized tests and institutional-level surveys.
- Once assessment data is gathered, the committee will be responsible for evaluating this information and making recommendations to improve the general education curriculum.
- The committee will then pass these recommendations to the appropriate governance and administrative units, including the Office of Academic Affairs, the respective colleges and departments involved in teaching courses within the general education curriculum, and the Faculty Senate. Further, the Center for Academic Excellence and Student Engagement will be involved in designing instructional and faculty development programs intended to support continuous improvement in the curriculum based on identified needs.

<u>Administrative Support</u>

Administrative responsibility for both general education and the assessment of general education learning outcomes rests currently with the Associate Vice Chancellor for Teaching, Learning, and Academic Programs. However, given that the effort to assess general education is sure to require more time and resources than it has in the past, it seems clear that additional administrative support is necessary. To that end, the General Education Policy Review Committee supports the creation of a Director of General Education and an Assessment Coordinator to facilitate the implementation of the GEP. Both positions will play critical roles in assisting the GEC to manage and evaluate the new curriculum, and in working with the Center for Academic Excellence and Student Engagement to "close

the loop," or in other words, to utilize the information gathered through assessment directly to improve teaching and learning in the general education curriculum.

Center for Academic Excellence and Student Engagement (CAESE)

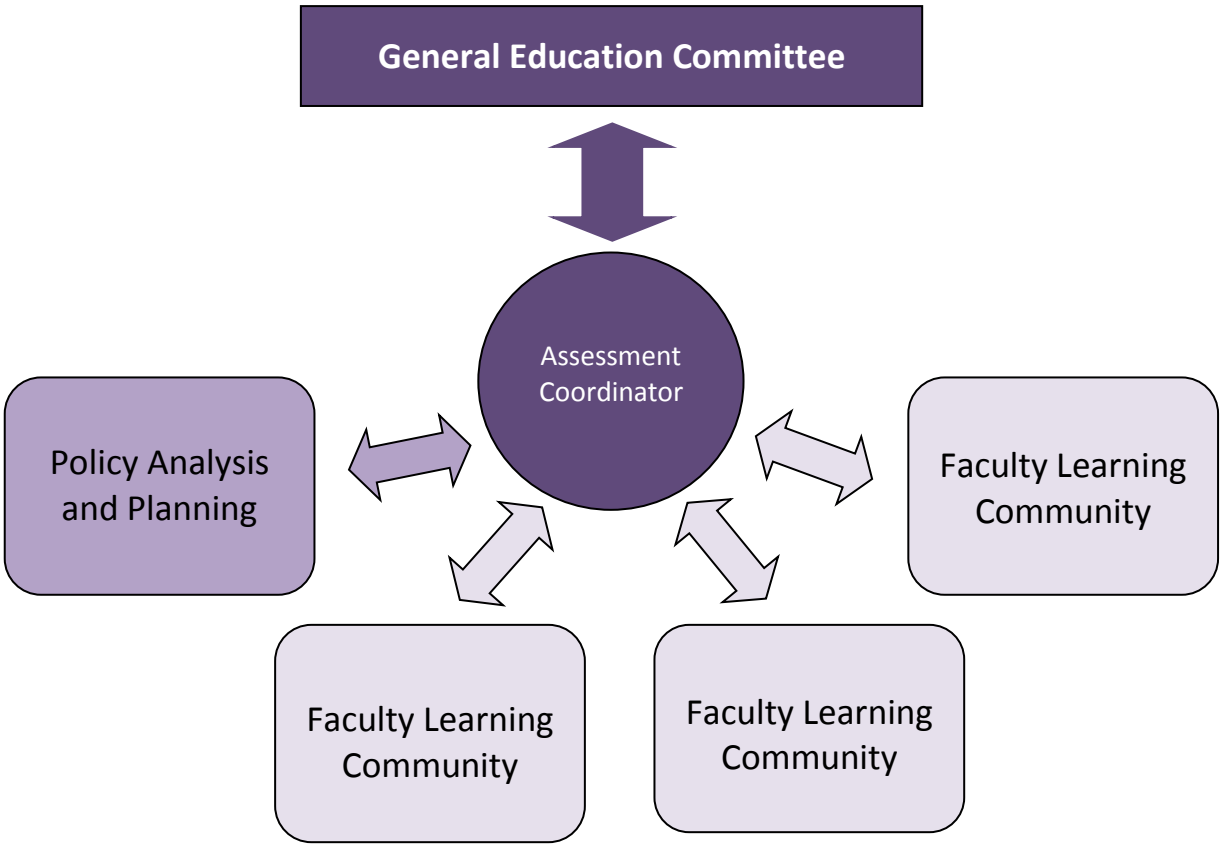
To help address this situation, the General Education Policy Review Committee (GEPRC) supports the idea of locating an Assessment Coordinator within the CAESE who could assume responsibility for facilitating assessment of the general education curriculum and resulting conversations about continuous improvement.

In addition, the Office of Policy Analysis and Planning (formerly known as Institutional Research) has a history of involvement with assessment efforts at UWSP through the administration of standardized instruments, student engagement surveys, and other home-grown general education assessment tools. In the current structure, the Office of Policy Analysis and Planning is charged with supporting the Assessment Subcommittee in its work as well as handling matters of institutional accountability.

As we implement the new General Education Program, institutional-level assessment will continue to be an essential component of efforts to assess and improve the curriculum. Though members of GEPRC propose using course portfolios as the primary means of gathering assessment data from individual courses and instructors (see below), this information must be supplemented by institutional-level assessment that attempts to measure student learning and experiences across the curriculum. Institutional-level measures also can be used for triangulation of data.

We support this continued collaboration and, as with the areas presented above, we support further definition of the role of this administrative function in assessment efforts, including the inclusion of a representative from the Office of Policy Analysis and Planning as a permanent member of both the new General Education Committee and the Assessment Subcommittee.

The Assessment Process



Evidence of student achievement in the general education program will be collected through course-based measurements that utilize course portfolios compiled by instructors and institutional-level measurements conducted through periodic standardized testing and surveys administered by the Office of Policy Analysis and Planning. This information will be reviewed and evaluated by faculty learning communities under the direction of the General Education Committee, the Director of General Education, and the Assessment Coordinator. The committee, in turn, will then pass these results and its recommendations for improving the curriculum along to the appropriate faculty members, governance committees, and administrative units as described below. The university will be responsible for assisting faculty with implementing the recommendations made by the committee.

<u>Course-Based Assessment</u>

Our approach to course-based assessment is built on several core assumptions:

- Courses should be designed to meet *all* the approved learning outcomes. Among the most valuable aspects of assessment is the simple act of being explicit about intended learning outcomes and then employing backward design in constructing the course itself. In the case of the First Year Seminar, for example:

    - If students are meant to understand the importance of a liberal education, what readings, assignments, or activities will help them to achieve this goal?
    - If students are expected to practice their critical thinking and information literacy skills, how will this take place?
    - If students are supposed to design a plan for their educations by the end of the semester, what assignments along the way will prepare them to do so?
    - Given the desired learning outcomes, what evidence can be collected that allows students to demonstrate their achievement? And, what performance criteria will be used to evaluate evidence of student learning (rubrics, etc.)?
- Although courses should be *designed* to meet all the approved outcomes, the actual *assessment* can and should focus on a smaller subset of these outcomes.
- Because assessment is primarily concerned with improving student learning, the manner in which it occurs should be determined by the faculty involved in teaching the curriculum.
- Even more important, instructors should employ a problem-based approach to carrying out this assessment. In other words, assessment should involve not simply gathering evidence of student learning (which tends to reduce assessment to mere reporting), but rather asking specific questions related to particular learning outcomes and attempting to answer those questions through the gathering and evaluation of evidence. The most important such problem statement is simply: "How well are students learning and how do I know?" But faculty might also explore other closely related and more focused queries. Again, in the case of the First Year Seminar, for example:
    - What pre-conceptions about liberal education hinder students' ability to acclimate themselves to college?
    - How do first-year student reading skills affect their ability to think critically?
    - What do students expect from a college education, and how do these expectations influence their approach to the requirements of General Education and their majors?

Why a Problem-Based Approach?

Among the biggest challenges in creating an effective assessment program is to ensure that the information gathered about student learning is actually used to improve teaching and learning. Employing a problem-based approach can help to address this concern. To embed assessment work in faculty-inspired questions that arise naturally from their own experience in the classroom and their own curiosity as teachers and scholars is immediately to instill this work with greater relevance and meaning than simple reporting would normally encourage. Consequently, it also increases the likelihood that the results of assessment can and will be utilized for continuous improvement.

Although assessment is often viewed as a reporting activity, in essence it is action research—a systematic inquiry into the outcomes and processes of student learning designed to gather information and, more importantly, use that information to improve practice and monitor the impact of changes. One of the benefits of action research is that it mirrors the scholarly process, allowing faculty to employ

similar methodologies and skills they utilize in their disciplinary research to investigate student learning in their classrooms.

Among the principal advantages of the problem-based approach is the open-ended, yet grounded nature of the inquiry, which enables faculty to tailor their assessment efforts to their own experiences in teaching particular courses, and therefore to ensure its relevance. Take, for example, a faculty member teaching a First Year Seminar and attempting to gather information related to the expectation that students will be able to "describe the importance of critical thinking and information literacy and apply the associated skills." If assessment is reduced to mere reporting, the instructor is essentially asked to answer a question that hews very closely to this learning outcome; namely, "How many of my students are able to practice critical thinking?" Because this question is rather broad and general, it not only fails to suggest concrete ways in which the instructor can ground the inquiry in particular assignments within the course, it also yields results that fail to suggest concrete ways to improve the course. By contrast, problem-based assessment encourages much greater flexibility in determining the most relevant and meaningful approach to the investigation of student learning. In the case of the First Year Seminar, to ask "How well are students learning to think critically and how do I know?" is immediately to suggest a variety of teaching strategies and assessments that might be employed to explore the issue. Even more important, because these strategies and assessments come directly from the instructor's own experience in his or her course, the information collected will be immediately useful in changing how the instructor teaches critical thinking in the future.

For a detailed explanation of the theory underpinning this problem-based approach to assessment, see Peggy Maki, *Assessing for Learning: Building a Sustainable Commitment Across the Institution*, Second Edition (2010), 123-153.

The Course Portfolio

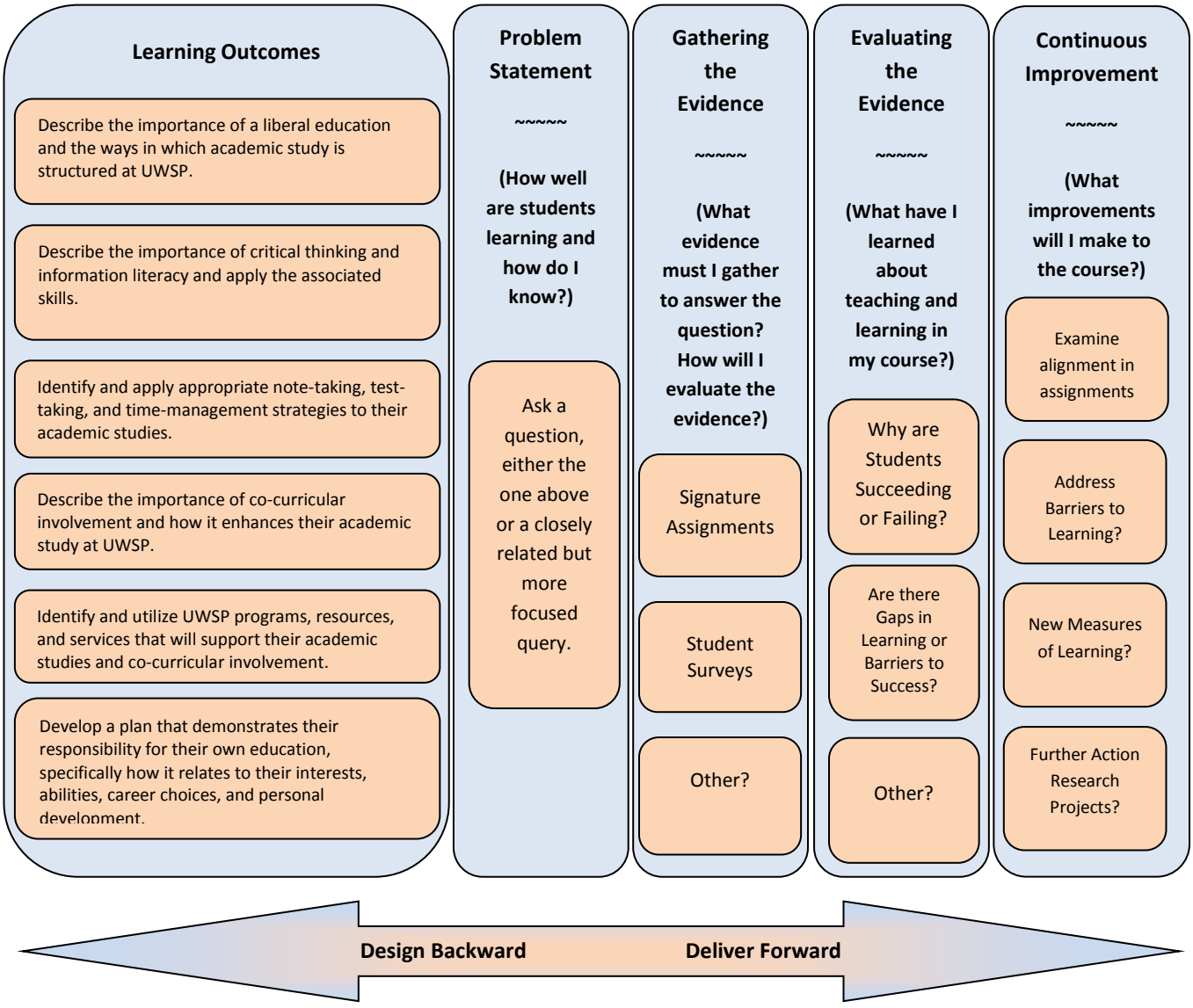
The electronic course portfolio provides an ideal instrument for facilitating this kind of self-reflective process of action research. The course portfolio is a selection of materials from a given course—including the syllabus and relevant examples of student work—along with reflective statements written by the instructor that explore how the course structures and assessment strategies contributed to student learning. (For the relative advantages and disadvantages of other methods of assessment, see "Methods of Direct Assessment: Advantages and Disadvantages" at the end of this explanation.)

Faculty members teaching designated general education courses will be required to prepare and submit a course portfolio on a pre-determined cycle. Each course portfolio should contain the following elements:

1. Course Information:
    a. A syllabus, including an explanation of how the intended learning outcomes of the course align with those of the General Education Program category.
    b. A brief narrative describing how the relevant General Education learning outcomes will be met by students through course experiences, assignments, and/or activities.

2. Assessment Information:
    a. A discipline-appropriate evaluation of student attainment of at least one learning outcome, including a brief explanation of how student learning was assessed. (Note: Although courses should be *designed* to meet all the approved learning outcomes in a particular category, the actual *assessment* can and should focus on a smaller subset of these outcomes.)
    b. Examples of student work related to the evaluation above showing a range of student achievement.
    c. The specific criteria or rubric that was used to evaluate student work.
    d. Results of any other feedback mechanisms used in the course that explore student perceptions of course assignments and their alignment with the general education learning outcomes.
    e. A brief statement explaining how assessment results will be used to improve learning in the course in the future.

The process of preparing a course portfolio in the First Year Seminar is illustrated in the diagram below:



Like any assessment tool, the course portfolio has potential disadvantages. Two in particular are worth noting. First, simply compiling the course portfolio will require time and effort from faculty members already working hard to balance many obligations related to their teaching, scholarship, and service. Second, unlike some methods of assessment, the course portfolio does not rely on nationally-normed benchmarks of student learning that allow comparison to other institutions. With that said, however, the course portfolio does possess a number of advantages that make it a good fit for conducting assessment at UWSP.

In particular, the course portfolio is an instrument designed more for the continuous improvement of teaching and learning than simply for compliance with assessment requirements. This is true precisely because it relies more on faculty reflection and faculty-driven modifications to the curriculum than it does on benchmarks of student achievement. Likewise, because the information required for compiling the course portfolio comes directly from the courses and the instructors involved, the instrument is adaptable to any discipline. The course portfolio, in fact, appears to be among the least disruptive and least time-consuming assessment instruments available: instructors have complete freedom to identify the measurements of student learning that are most appropriate and meaningful for their courses; the information they gather comes directly from their courses, which minimizes the potential burden on both students and instructors; and finally, because the course portfolio is focused on continuous improvement rather than compliance, the amount of information required from each course is relatively modest compared to other assessment methods. When utilized in the manner described below, the course portfolio functions as a means of faculty and instructional development, not simply assessment. Faculty can obtain individualized, constructive feedback from colleagues teaching in the same General Education area, without influencing decisions regarding retention, promotion, and tenure.

For further information on the scholarly underpinnings and use of course portfolios, see the following: Daniel Bernstein et al., *Making Teaching and Learning Visible: Course Portfolios and the Peer Review of Teaching* (San Francisco: Anker Publishing, 2006); http://www.courseportfolio.org, a Web site sponsored by the University of Nebraska-Lincoln; and http://web.wm.edu/sacs/pies/GER/?svr=www, the General Education assessment Web site of the College of William and Mary.

Institutional-Level Assessment

The university periodically has used standardized testing (specifically the Collegiate Assessment of Academic Proficiency, CAAP) administered by the Office of Policy Analysis and Planning in the past. However, with increasing external calls for accountability, the university was required to select an instrument to be used with regularity as part of our commitment to the national Voluntary System of Accountability (VSA) effort and for UW System accountability. In March 2010, Faculty Senate approved the selection of the ETS Proficiency Profile (formerly called the MAPP test) as our instrument to be used for VSA. Among the best features of the Proficiency Profile is that it appears useful not just for providing the kind of "value-added" measurement of learning required by the VSA, but also for its potential in helping to assess general education, including program outcomes related to reading, critical thinking, writing, and mathematics. If the test is to be utilized for general education assessment and not just the VSA, the sample sizes required would likely need to be even larger than the minimum numbers (200 freshmen and 200 seniors) established by the testing company.

UWSP also has a history of participating in other surveys (such as the National Survey of Student Engagement, NSSE) as part of UW-System initiatives and requirements for accountability that are handled through the Office of Policy Analysis and Planning. Although NSSE is based on student self-reported perceptions, it is grounded in the principles of effective educational practice, which are drawn from the higher education literature. Its overall purpose is to inform improvement efforts at the

institution and, thus, items from the NSSE have been mapped onto UWSP's general education outcomes, to serve as a part of the overall assessment plan.

Although these measures will provide a useful snapshot of student learning in the General Education Program, they cannot provide the kind of fine-grained information required to facilitate continuous improvement of the curriculum. Consequently, the General Education Committee will need to utilize the information gleaned from these institutional-level surveys in the context of other data gathered through course-based assessment.

Evaluating Assessment Data

Within each General Education category, the evaluation of course portfolios will be facilitated by a faculty learning community. The Assessment Coordinator and a member of the GEC representing the general education category will work in conjunction with a small group of faculty who teach in the category under review. (Details about the composition and participation of this small group of faculty members will be developed by the Assessment Coordinator and the General Education Committee).

What are Faculty Learning Communities?

Drawing heavily on the work of Alexander Meiklejohn (*The Experimental College*, 1932) and John Dewey (*How We Think*, 1933), learning communities emerged in the 1930s as a response to increased disciplinary specialization and fragmentation. As a student-centered approach to shared inquiry, learning communities allowed students to work together to understand their varied college experiences, and to provide students with a sense of coherence across disciplines.

Learning communities are not limited to students, however. The use of faculty learning communities has also been successful in higher education. Whether organized by cohort or by topic, faculty learning communities provide an opportunity for curricular redesign, development of new pedagogies, professional development, the scholarship of teaching and learning, as well as other trans-disciplinary collaborations.

Many colleges and universities support faculty development by forming learning communities. Typically, learning communities have 8 to 12 participants and provide opportunities to meet regularly (somewhere between every week and every month) over a period of time (usually for a semester or an academic year). Some faculty learning communities take the form of a book group, while others take the form of a work group to implement some new program or initiative to improve student learning.

In general, however, faculty learning communities work toward a common goal in a structured and trusting environment. This ongoing, social aspect is especially important for the success of faculty learning communities. At their best, faculty learning communities allow for personal and professional growth, meaningful curricular development, and greater collegiality among educators.

Recently, faculty learning communities have been formed around various pedagogical and curricular issues. For example, faculty members in Ohio have used faculty learning communities to investigate the effectiveness of technology in instruction. In Michigan, faculty members have been meeting to figure

out the best ways to incorporate service-learning across various disciplines. In Seattle, educators have worked in learning communities to reflect upon and develop effective small group assignments that promote creativity, collaboration, and innovation. And at Miami University, tenured faculty members have formed learning communities to refresh, renew, and nurture their passion for teaching and learning.

Faculty Learning Communities and Assessment

Because the most meaningful assessment results will be produced through the direct involvement of the faculty members who are actually teaching the courses under review, faculty learning communities can play an important part in the assessment of the General Education program. In particular, groups of 4 to 6 faculty, each organized around the various general education categories (i.e., Humanities, Social Sciences, First Year Seminar, etc.), will gather information about student learning and make recommendations regarding the improvement of the curriculum ("closing the loop").

The process is two-fold: 1) results will be shared with individual faculty members to provide feedback that they can use to improve teaching and learning in their courses; and 2) the findings of the collective portfolio review will be aggregated and reported to the appropriate administrative and governance units to facilitate continuous improvement in the GEP curriculum.

However the process might unfold, each faculty learning community will be asked to generate a brief report about the successes and challenges that emerged in teaching and assessing student learning within its particular area of the curriculum. In addition to this, each faculty learning community will be asked to report what changes they are likely to make (as individuals), and what changes might need to take place (on a larger scale) to improve teaching and learning. To ensure that the reports are as candid and constructive as possible, all identifying information will be excluded. The reports will then be provided to the GEC. Based on this information, the committee will make decisions about potential changes to the GEP, and it will work with CAESE to continue to support faculty members in implementing its decisions.

For example, a faculty learning community might be formed around Quantitative Literacy. As a result of "comparing notes" some instructors might find that their students are struggling with specific mathematical concepts. Participants might choose to share effective educational strategies to remedy this (i.e., sharing of "best practices"). However, it might also turn out that students are struggling because they are placed into courses that are just too difficult for them. In this case, the faculty learning community might recommend that the process by which students "test into" courses be revised. This recommendation would be shared with the Assessment Coordinator who would pass the recommendation to the General Education Committee for consideration.

As another example, a faculty learning community might be formed to consider the U.S. Diversity GEP category. As a result of meeting regularly to discuss successes and challenges, instructors might learn that some students do not fully understand the concepts of marginalization and discrimination. After the faculty learning community finishes its work, participants might wish to collaborate to share resources, case studies, or other useful teaching materials. In some cases, multiple faculty members

might continue to work together and have students from both classes meet together for a common experience (a concert, a play, a guest speaker, etc.). In this way, the faculty learning community might give rise to innovative, cross-disciplinary collaborations beyond the faculty learning community's work and outside of teaching classes. In other cases, the faculty learning community might recommend additional faculty development activities for the campus at-large and the Assessment Coordinator would be in a position to address the need.

Using Assessment Data to Improve Learning

It is the role of each faculty learning community working in concert with the Assessment Coordinator to synthesize information derived from course-based and institutional-level assessment to create a report for the General Education Committee. Each report will evaluate student learning in a given general education category and program outcome and offer recommendations concerning the improvement of the curriculum.

The four program-level learning outcomes for UWSP's General Education Program are:

1. Demonstrate critical thinking, quantitative, and communication skills necessary to succeed in a rapidly changing global society.
2. Demonstrate broad knowledge of the physical, social, and cultural worlds as well as the methods by which this knowledge is produced.
3. Recognize that responsible global citizenship involves personal accountability, social equity, and environmental sustainability.
4. Apply their knowledge and skills, working in interdisciplinary ways to solve problems.

As shown in the General Education Program Curriculum Map (below), students will be expected to achieve these outcomes through courses taken in four levels: Foundation, Investigation, Cultural and Environmental Awareness, and Integration. Within each of these levels, students will take courses designed to develop their skills and knowledge in several categories. For example, in the Foundation level, students will complete a three-credit First Year Seminar course, nine credits of Written and Oral Communication, three credits of Quantitative Literacy, and one credit of Wellness. As is evident in the General Education Program Curriculum Map, student demonstration of achievement of the four program learning outcomes will be distributed across several curricular requirements. From a practical viewpoint, the assessment plan therefore focuses on collecting and evaluating evidence from the courses approved for each category at each level.

The procedure for collecting course-based evidence of student achievement within the General Education Program will be as follows.

1. The General Education Committee reviews and approves courses for General Education credit, based on the course criteria and learning outcomes.
2. Instructors teach General Education courses.

3. Each level of the General Education curriculum—Foundation, Investigation, Integration, and Cultural & Environmental Awareness—as well as each Program Outcome is assessed every five years (see the Assessment Cycle, below).
4. Instructors teaching courses in categories under review in the fall will prepare and submit course portfolios by February 1.
5. The Assessment Coordinator works with the Office of Policy Analysis and Planning to assemble institutional-level assessment information (see below).
6. The Assessment Coordinator facilitates the formation of faculty learning communities to review course portfolios and relevant institutional data.
7. In addition to providing individual feedback to instructors, each faculty learning community, working with the Assessment Coordinator, will compile a report for the General Education Committee, removing references to specific courses and instructors.

The collection of institutional-level data of student achievement within the General Education Program will be as follows.

1. The Office of Policy Analysis and Planning will administer the ETS Proficiency Profile standardized test every three years and will work in concert with the Assessment Coordinator on using the results with the faculty learning communities and the General Education Committee.
2. The Office of Policy Analysis and Planning will administer the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) every three years, and will work with the assessment coordinator and GEC to share results that are applicable and useful for assessment of the GEP.
3. The Office of Policy Analysis and Planning will oversee and administer other institutional-level assessments as needed or required for external accountability or reporting.
4. When opportunities to collaborate with General Education Program assessment arise, the Office of Policy Analysis and Planning will collaborate with the Assessment Coordinator and General Education Committee to maximize the potential uses of institutional-level data for overall continuous improvement efforts.

Evaluation and reporting of General Education Program assessment will be completed by the General Education Committee as follows.

1. The General Education Committee receives the comprehensive report from the Assessment Coordinator (which includes results from both course-based assessment from the faculty learning communities and the institutional–level assessment from the Office of Policy Analysis and Planning).
2. The General Education Committee reviews the comprehensive report and based on the evidence provided will consider recommended changes, develop additional recommendations, report back to the campus community, and coordinate with CAESE to support faculty who will then guide curriculum development efforts to improve student learning within the General Education Program.

3. If necessary, the General Education Committee submits recommendations for changes in learning outcomes, course criteria, assessment procedures, etc., to the Faculty Senate for discussion and approval.

The Assessment Cycle

Assessment of student learning within the General Education curriculum will take place on a five-year cycle. The first four years of the cycle will be focused on courses in the four levels of the curriculum. In addition, during each of the first four years, information will be gathered related to one of the four General Education Program Outcomes from instructors teaching within the GEP. This may include collecting information from GEP requirements that are embedded within majors (Capstone Experience in the Major and Communication in the Major). In this way, these embedded requirements can aid assessment within department-level academic programs and as a culminating experience for institutional-level evaluation of the General Education Program. (Coordination of this reporting cycle will need to be worked out between the General Education Committee and the Assessment Subcommittee.) Based on these results, the fifth year of the Assessment Cycle will be devoted to a comprehensive review of the General Education Program and Assessment Plan.

Year 1:

- Foundation-Level Courses (First Year Seminar, Written and Oral Communication, Quantitative Literacy, and Wellness)
- Program Outcome 1 (Demonstrate critical thinking, quantitative, and communication skills necessary to succeed in a rapidly changing global society)

Year 2:

- Investigation-Level Courses (Arts, Humanities, Historical Perspectives, Social Sciences, and Natural Sciences)
- Program Outcome 2 (Demonstrate broad knowledge of the physical, social, and cultural worlds as well as the methods by which this knowledge is produced)

Year 3:

- Cultural and Environmental Awareness-Level Courses (Global Awareness, U.S. Diversity, and Environmental Responsibility)
- Program Outcome 3 (Recognize that responsible global citizenship involves personal accountability, social equity, and environmental sustainability)

Year 4:

- Integration-Level Courses (Interdisciplinary Studies, Experiential Learning, Communication in the Major, and Capstone Experience in the Major)
- Program Outcome 4 (Apply their knowledge and skills, working in interdisciplinary ways to solve problems)

Year 5:

- Comprehensive Review of General Education Program and Assessment Plan

A preliminary schedule for the first six years of this assessment plan appears in the table below. Note that because many of UWSP's existing General Degree Requirement courses will initially be "grandfathered" into the new General Education Program, the year preceding the implementation of the new curriculum will be devoted to an Alignment Project intended to allow faculty the needed time to incorporate the new General Education Program learning outcomes into their courses and make any necessary adjustments to their assignments and teaching strategies.

Teaching Year	GE Assessment	2012-2013		2013-2014		2014-2015		2015-2016		2016-2017		2017-2018		2018-2019	
		Fall	Spring	Fall	Spring	Fall	Spring	Fall	Spring	Fall	Spring	Fall	Spring	Fall	Spring
2012-2013	*Alignment Project*														
2013-2014	Foundation														
	Demonstrate critical thinking, quantitative, and communication skills necessary to succeed in a rapidly changing global society.														
2014-2015	Investigation														
	Demonstrate broad knowledge of the physical, social, and cultural worlds as well as the methods by which this knowledge is produced.														
2015-2016	Cultural & Environmental Awareness														
	Recognize that responsible global citizenship involves personal accountability, social equity, and environmental sustainability.														
2016-2017	Integration														
	Apply their knowledge and skills, working in interdisciplinary ways to solve problems.														
2017-2018	Comprehensive Review														
2018-2019	Foundation														
	Demonstrate critical thinking, quantitative, and communication skills necessary to succeed in a rapidly changing global society.														

- Instructors teach GDR courses with new GEP outcomes and report on alignment of syllabi and assignments.
- Instructors teach General Education courses; prepare and submit course portfolios by the beginning of each spring semester.
- Faculty learning communities review portfolios and provide feedback to individual instructors.
- Assessment Coordinator aggregates findings and prepares report for General Education Committee by May 1.
- General Education Committee makes recommendations to improve curriculum through faculty governance.
- Instructors incorporate changes to support General Education Program.
- Faculty development opportunities provided through work groups, topical workshops, or action research projects.
- Ongoing teaching and faculty development programs.

Methods of Direct Assessment: Advantages and Disadvantages

Alternative methods of direct assessment:

- Course Completion
- Standardized Testing
- Capstone Course Activities
- Student Satisfaction Surveys
- Student Portfolios

1. Course Completion
    a. Advantages
        - Faculty already must assess the extent to which students meet expectations within their classes in assigning grades. Thus, one might ask simply if passing the course shows some level of educational growth.
        - This would be simple as it would not require new techniques for assessment.
    b. Disadvantages
        - Course grades provide a very blunt measure of assessment. While they provide a simple snapshot of achievement, they are inadequate for assessing achievement of multiple general education learning outcomes. The purpose of assigning a grade is to evaluate the achievement of a single student across a variety of learning outcomes. However, the purpose of GEP assessment is to evaluate the achievement on a specific learning outcome across all students in the course.
        - Grades alone do not provide formative feedback that is necessary for continuous improvement efforts.
    c. Overall reaction:
        - While the assigning of grades is related to assessment, they are not measuring the same thing. As such, one cannot serve as a substitute for the other.

2. Standardized Tests
    a. Advantages
        - Standardized tests are commonly used to assess student learning. These can be in the form of nationally-normed tests from external sources, or internally-designed tests that more closely match our specific learning outcomes.
        - They can be issued on a pre/post basis to identify value-added measurements of student learning. For example, the test can be administered to a statistical sample of incoming students and those who have completed their general education requirements. The results can then be compared to identify student growth occurring through the general education classes.
        - Nationally-normed tests provide the ability to compare our students' results to other institutions and provide a direct measure of relative quality. The Assessment

Subcommittee has proposed using the ETS Proficiency Profile to satisfy VSA requirements. An advantage to the ETS Proficiency Profile is that it allows for the inclusion of internally-designed questions to assess learning outcomes that might not be directly addressed in the standard test, such as environmental literacy.

- By administering the tests to seniors, standardized tests provide a measurement of deep knowledge that students retain beyond the semester that a specific class is taken.

b. Disadvantages

- There are numerous difficulties in determining how to interpret the results and use them to improve teaching and learning. It would be tempting to use statistical analysis to identify differences in average scores across courses that satisfy the same GEP requirement. While such correlations between class choice and test outcomes could be performed, the results are not scientific due to the potential for selection bias. For example, suppose that students who have taken a chemistry lab perform better on the exam than those taking other natural science lab courses. This may simply identify that students with strong, pre-existing, natural science skills are more likely to take a chemistry lab, compared to students that have previously struggled with natural science classes. As a result it is difficult to assess if stronger learning occurs from specific courses due to pre-existing differences in student skills that might shape their course selection.
- The administration of tests to a large sample could create significant budgetary strains as well as difficulties in getting (or requiring) students to take the exams outside of class time. The College of William and Mary has a special 'assessment day' during which all classes are cancelled to accommodate such tests. Other schools have used incentives to motivate students to volunteer to take the test. Still other institutions have looked at embedding common exam questions in final exams for all courses in the same general education category.
- There is a legitimate fear that such tests could encourage instructors to 'teach to the test,' in order to improve student performance on the test, which is not really the same as improving student learning.
- Such a test would need to be carefully designed to assess the general education learning outcomes without inadvertently favoring the methods and paradigms of specific disciplines within general education.

c. Overall reaction

- It is expected that the ETS Proficiency Profile will be administered to a cross-sectional sample of graduating seniors and incoming students in selected years to satisfy VSA requirements and those of the UW System. The test will also provide a useful value-added measurement of the achievement of general education learning outcomes, though it does not provide course-level feedback to foster continuous improvement. Thus, the test, by itself, does not satisfy all the goals of assessment, but should be used as one part of our general education assessment plan.

3. Capstone Course Activities
    a. Advantages:
        - Capstone courses allow students an opportunity to reflect and complete assignments which combine the knowledge and skills learned throughout a curriculum. Such courses provide a viable and attractive option for program assessment of major requirements which naturally build off the general education requirements.
    b. Disadvantages:
        - A number of academic programs have capstone course requirements. However, these courses are typically rigorous and focus on culminating the knowledge and skills of a specific discipline. This approach would seem to work best if there were capstone courses designed specifically for general education, separate from the students' majors.
        - Depending on how the capstone experiences were designed, they could have the same disadvantages as the standardized testing. Specifically, it would difficult to correlate results to the specific general education courses taken without selection bias, though this would alleviate the sample size issues.
    c. Overall reaction:
        - In the absence of capstone courses as a specific part of the general education curriculum, these do not seem to be a viable option.

4. Student Portfolios
    a. Advantages:
        - Student portfolios, if done well, can provide a mechanism for assessing both the overall achievement of learning outcomes and the growth of achievement as students progress through a curriculum.
        - Student portfolios enable assessment of complex sets of tasks and objectives, with examples of many different types of student work, including interdisciplinary learning and capabilities;
        - Student portfolios can capture a variety of work, potentially providing both qualitative and quantitative measures of achievement and in-class and out-of-class learning experiences with considerable flexibility in their design.
        - Student portfolios require artifacts demonstrating student learning, which are considered to be a form of "authentic assessment" – that is, a demonstration of knowledge, skill, or disposition
        - Student portfolios facilitate student reflection and metacognition, and the process of compiling the portfolio can facilitate additional understanding about what they have and have not yet learned.
    b. Disadvantages:
        - Student portfolios would need to be assembled either by students directly, or by requiring faculty to post examples of achievement from their courses. The result is

that either the students or faculty would have a substantial requirement present in assembling these documents.

- Once completed, the student portfolios would need to be examined by a group charged with evaluating the portfolios using a common rubric; this is a labor-intensive process. Given the number of students attending UWSP, we would recommend only reviewing a statistical sampling of portfolios. Without examining each portfolio, it would be difficult to monitor compliance and provide a mechanism for enforcement of this requirement.
- There can be added expenses in storing and organizing the portfolios.

c. Overall reaction:

- Student portfolios are very attractive in theory, though there are numerous complications in implementing such a strategy that would provide quality portfolios. Portfolios can be particularly useful for program assessment of major requirements, particularly when they can be blended with a capstone course or requirement.
- The proposed focus on course portfolios will provide a more manageable amount of data for both faculty assembling the portfolios and for those charged for evaluating the portfolios. In addition, course portfolios achieve two important outcomes: 1) assessment of the GEP, and 2) ongoing faculty development.

UWSP General Education Program
Curriculum Map

Mission Statement:
The General Education Program provides the framework of a liberal education, equipping students with the knowledge and skills to facilitate intellectual and personal growth, pursue their advanced studies, and improve the world in which they live.

	Foundation: Developing Fundamental Skills				**Investigation: Understanding the Physical, Social, and Cultural Worlds**					**Integration: Applying Knowledge and Skills**				**Cultural & Environmental Awareness**		
Program Outcomes	*First Year Seminar*	*Written and Oral Communication*	*Quantitative Literacy*	*Wellness*	*Arts*	*Humanities*	*Historical Perspectives*	*Social Sciences*	*Natural Sciences*	*Interdisciplinary Studies*	*Experiential Learning*	*Communication in the Major*	*Capstone Experience in the Major*	*Global Awareness*	*U.S. Diversity*	*Environmental Responsibility*
Demonstrate critical thinking, quantitative, and communication skills necessary to succeed in a rapidly changing global society.	I	D	D		D	D	D	D	D	D	D	M	M			
Acquire broad knowledge of the physical, social, and cultural worlds as well as the methods by which this knowledge is produced.	I				D	D	D	D	D	D	D		M			
Recognize that responsible global citizenship involves personal accountability, social equity, and environmental sustainability.	I			I						D	D		M	D	D	D
Apply their knowledge and skills, working in interdisciplinary ways to solve problems.					I	I	I	I	I	D	D	D	M			

I → Introduce D → Develop M → Master