

TO: FYS Instructors, Spring 2011
FROM: Greg Summers, on behalf of the HLC Assessment Academy Team
RE: FYS Assessment Project
DATE: December 3, 2010

One of the principal objectives of the FYS Pilot program is to model the process by which we might assess student learning in the new General Education curriculum. Consequently, I'm writing to ask for your help with this project and to offer some thoughts about how we might proceed.

UWSP has little history of assessing student learning in the GDRs, so whatever method the campus winds up selecting to assess the new GE program, we will necessarily be starting slowly and building the effort from the ground up. During the past several years, while members of GEPRC have been at work assisting the campus to create the new GE, a separate, smaller committee called the HLC Assessment Academy Team has been exploring various ways that student learning might be assessed in the curriculum. The team's proposed assessment plan is not yet finalized. It will eventually be shared with GEPRC and circulated to the campus for consideration and approval as part of Step 6 in the GE reform process. Nevertheless, the plan is developed enough to be piloted as part of the FYS program this spring. Hence, we are turning to you for help.

The GE Assessment Plan (in brief)

The assessment plan involves gathering data from two basic sources: 1) institutional-level measurements conducted through periodic standardized testing; and 2) course-based measurements which gather information directly from the faculty involved in teaching the curriculum. The Office of Policy Analysis and Planning will administer the former, so we don't need to worry about these measurements for now. It is the latter course-based measurements for which we are seeking your assistance.

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. So, 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 that 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?
- 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.
 - 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. 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?

To embed assessment work in these faculty-inspired questions is to instill them with greater meaning than simple reporting would normally encourage. It also increases the likelihood that the results of assessment can and will be used to improve teaching and learning.

- 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.

The Faculty Learning Community

To gather course-based information, we hope to utilize faculty learning communities. Learning communities have a lengthy history in higher education. Drawing heavily on the work of Alexander Meiklejohn (*The Experimental College*, 1932) and John Dewey (*How We Think*, 1933), learning communities emerged in the 1920s and 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 “task force” 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.

While faculty learning communities can be formed around various pedagogical and curricular issues, our hope is to employ them for assessment—because the most meaningful evaluations of student learning will be produced through the direct involvement of the faculty members who are actually teaching the courses under review.

The Course Portfolio

The principal method by which we hope to collect course-based assessment data is the course portfolio. A course portfolio is a compilation 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. Ideally, each course portfolio should contain the following elements:

1. Course Information:
 - a) A syllabus, including intended learning outcomes aligned with those of the General Education program. (In this case, the First Year Seminar.)
 - 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 question related to at least one General Education learning outcome that the instructor has decided to explore through assessment.
- b) A discipline-appropriate evaluation of student attainment of this learning outcome, including a brief explanation of how student learning was assessed.
- c) Three examples related to the evaluation above showing student work that exceeds acceptable performance, meets acceptable performance, and fails to meet acceptable performance.
- d) Results of feedback mechanisms used in the course (e.g., surveys, classroom assessment techniques, such as one-minute papers, Plus/Delta, guided instructional feedback technique, etc.) 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.

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 questions that assessment is intended to answer as well as the measurements of student learning that are most appropriate and meaningful for addressing these questions; the information that instructors 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.

How You Can Help

Ideally, we hope that instructors will eventually be able to compile the course portfolios described above electronically via a dedicated website. The infrastructure to allow this is not yet in place, however. Consequently, we're hoping that the FYS instructors can pilot this process and compile the resulting portfolios on the FYS SharePoint site already established: <https://campus.uwsp.edu/sites/acadaff/collaboration/fys-teaching/SitePages/Home.aspx>.

Since our assessment program is intended to be collaborative, we're hoping that the FYS instructors can meet periodically as a faculty learning community during the Spring 2011 semester to discuss teaching and learning in the courses, and to assist one another in the effort to assess student learning. I'm suggesting the following meeting times below:

January 19, 4:00-6:00pm (Main 102-Founders' Room)

- Define Assessment Questions related to learning outcomes
- Meet with **Laurie Richlin**, expert on Faculty Learning Communities and keynote speaker at the January 20 UWSP Teaching Conference

~~February 15, 8:00-9:00am~~

- ~~Discussion of FYS issues~~
- ~~How to compile course portfolios on SharePoint~~

March 10, 7:30-9:00am

- Meet with **Peggy Maki**, nationally recognized expert on assessment

~~April 12, 8:00-9:00am~~

- ~~Discussion of FYS issues~~
- ~~Update on course portfolios/assessment efforts~~

May 23, 10:00am-12:00pm (new time)

- Wrap-up Discussion
- Final Compilation of Course Portfolios
- Recommendations for FYS program, Fall 2011

Please let me know if these dates will not work. The gatherings on January 19 and March 10 are the only ones we're unable to change, given that they involve meeting with guests who will be visiting UWSP.