

Cultivating Change: Reforming Assessment and General Education at the University of Wisconsin-Stevens Point



An Abbreviated Self-Study
Written in Preparation for the Focused Visit of the Higher Learning Commission
February 13-14, 2012



University of Wisconsin
Stevens Point

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2012 HLC Focused Visit Resource Room:

A comprehensive virtual “resource room” has been established at:

www.uwsp.edu/acadaff/Pages/HLC2012.aspx

This resource room includes the various appendices referred to in the text below.

I. Introduction

The second decade of the 21st century will be seen historically as one of the most challenging in the history of the University of Wisconsin-Stevens Point.

The 2010 state elections produced a dramatic turnover in political leadership in Wisconsin. The state also faced a large budget deficit. Proposals to deal with the deficit led to a contentious debate over state support for higher education and produced a super-charged atmosphere on campus.

State employees were required to pay more toward pensions and insurance benefits, leading to a net decline in pay. The UW System incurred budget cuts that were distributed to campuses on a prorated basis. UW-Stevens Point's share of state general purpose revenue cuts was \$1.3 million in the biennial budget. Further cuts due to lower state revenues than projected followed early in the 2011 autumn term. UW-Stevens Point was told to absorb a minimum of \$1.9 million in additional cuts, and faced the prospect of that cut increasing to \$3.1 million by the end of the fiscal year, for a total of \$4.4 million.

Despite these difficulties, the university continued to protect programmatic areas affecting students and their education from deep cuts.

Significantly in this climate, the university was able to complete and begin implementation of a comprehensive strategic plan that will help guide the institution as it adjusts to the new realities that are likely to bring more reductions in state support of higher education in Wisconsin. The strategic plan, referred to as "A Plan to Organize Our Work," incorporates a number of goals and actions in four broad areas: Advance Learning, Enhance Living, Develop and Leverage Resources, and Respect and Advance Our Legacy. With this tool in hand, despite the challenges posed by the ongoing budget difficulties, the university community is well-positioned to make strategic decisions about how to evolve and succeed in its core mission. On another front, administrative functions have been affected by a number of staff changes, leading to interim appointments for Provost and Vice Chancellor for Academic Affairs, Associate Vice Chancellor for Teaching, Learning, and Academic Programs, Vice Chancellor for University Advancement, and Director of University Relations and Communications.

The University of Wisconsin-Stevens Point was founded in 1894 as Stevens Point Normal School, a teacher-training institution with an initial enrollment of 152 students. It was first accredited (as Stevens Point Normal School) in 1916 and maintained this status until 1922, when it was dropped because of failure to submit required documents. Reaccredited in 1951, UW-Stevens Point has remained accredited ever since. In 1967, accreditation was extended to include preliminary accreditation for the Master's of Science in Teaching Home Economics. In 1969, preliminary accreditation was also granted for the Master's of Science in Teaching-Biology and the Master's of Science in Speech Pathology-Audiology.

UW-Stevens Point is accredited without stipulation for bachelor's- and master's-level degrees. Its Clinical Doctorate in Audiology was accredited by the Higher Learning Commission (HLC) in May 2006. The university does not offer degrees at off-campus venues, although it has recently received permission from the HLC to offer a number of programs via distance education. Originally part of the Wisconsin State University System, the Stevens Point campus became part of the University of Wisconsin System in 1971. The University of Wisconsin System comprises two doctoral institutions, eleven comprehensive institutions (collectively known as the University Cluster), and thirteen two-year colleges. The UW System also has several substantive articulation agreements with the Wisconsin Technical College System that allow students to transfer between the two statewide (but operationally separate) postsecondary systems. UW-Stevens Point is one of the eleven comprehensive institutions. It offers degree programs in 56 undergraduate majors, one associate's degree, nine master's degree majors, and the Doctorate of Audiology degree in collaboration with UW-Madison.

UW-Stevens Point underwent its last accreditation visit by the HLC in 2008. The evaluation was successful, and the university was deemed to be fulfilling its mission and in strong condition. (For more information, see Appendix A1: UWSP Comprehensive Self-Study 2008 and Appendix A2: Resource Room 2008.) Despite this generally positive review, however, the subsequent report of the HLC's site visit team did identify a number of concerns related to Criterion Three, which requires the organization to provide evidence of student learning and teaching effectiveness that demonstrates it is fulfilling its educational mission. In particular, the university's assessment of student learning and its General Education program—known locally as the General Degree Requirements (GDRs)—were deemed to be problematic enough that they required commission follow-up. The site visit team, in fact, recommended a “focused visit on assessment with a particular emphasis on the assessment and subsequent revision of the General Education program and General Degree Requirements by 01/30/12” (Appendix A3: HLC Report 2008, p. 10).

UW-Stevens Point had received similar concerns from past accreditation visits, and although efforts were made to respond to these issues, the changes ultimately proved inadequate. This time, however, the university has taken the challenge seriously and responded with a determined campaign to improve its approach to assessment and continuous improvement within its academic programs, including General Education. Doing so has required nothing less than shifting the culture of assessment at UW-Stevens Point. Although cultivating this kind of change takes time, the transformations under way at UW-Stevens Point have taken root and become established, and the resulting improvements in our collective practices are dramatic.

The typical manner of preparing for this kind of accreditation visit is to organize a steering committee to rally the campus community, gather information, and write the required self-study in advance of the visit. At UW-Stevens Point, by contrast, there has been little need to stoke the fires or urge the campus to make such concerted efforts. The entire campus community, in fact, has been engaged in exactly this kind of large-scale reform effort for several years. Every college and academic department, multiple governance committees, and faculty, staff and administrators from across campus have contributed. Furthermore, the process by which we have been guided has been genuinely open, transparent, and collaborative.

The self-study that follows is an effort to document this process and the resulting improvements we have made. These changes in practice include a new integrated process for academic program assessment and review, new degree requirements and a revised General Education curriculum which the campus has already begun to implement, a new assessment plan for General Education currently under consideration by faculty governance, and the creation of a comprehensive strategic plan to guide decision-making across the university. Although individually many of these transformations are still very much in progress, collectively they represent a tremendous stride forward in the assessment of student learning at UW-Stevens Point and especially our ability to use the information we gather to improve teaching and student success.

Institution's Response to the Concerns Raised by the Commission

In the abbreviated self-study report that follows, we have addressed the various concerns raised in the 2008 HLC Report (Appendix A3: HLC Report 2008). In the table below, we present an overview of the key changes implemented in response to HLC's concerns.

HLC's Concern	UWSP's Response
(1) Program Assessment efforts were "uneven" and campus culture did not embrace assessment as an important campus-wide initiative.	(1) Initiated a fundamental revision of program assessment: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> visited each department, identified needs, made recommendations; designed a series of workshops responding to identified needs and to support a comprehensive revision to program assessment (Assessment Academy); required all departments to submit Program Learning Outcomes, Curriculum Maps, and Assessment Plans; revised UWSP Handbook to reflect new approach to assessment.
(2) The General Degree Requirements were found to be credit-intensive, not well understood nor valued, and not based on learning outcomes.	(2) Carried out a six-step process to create a new General Education Program: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Step 1: Mission Statement (May 2008) Step 2: Goals & Program Outcomes (February 2009) Step 3: Model & Degree Types (April 2009) Step 4: Structural Components & Measurable Learning Outcomes (April 2010) Step 5: Course & Instructor Criteria (April 2011) Step 6: Administration, Implementation, & Assessment (proposed, Fall 2011)
(3) Assessment of general education was lacking.	(3) Proposed assessment plan for general education based on: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a continuous improvement model course portfolios faculty learning communities that engage faculty from across campus to share best practices.
(4) Faculty governance structures impeded effective assessment and management of general education.	(4) Revised Faculty Governance structure and processes: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Merged responsibilities for curriculum and assessment in a new General Education Committee; Revised assessment report and department review self-study formats Synchronized reporting schedules for the Assessment Subcommittee and the Department Review Subcommittee based on a 5-year and 10-year cycle, respectively; Proposed new positions: Director of General Education and Assessment Coordinator

Table 1

II. Program Assessment

In 2008, the HLC team found that program assessment at UW-Stevens Point was uneven. Although some departments had clearly defined, robust procedures to assess student learning within their programs, others had weak, ineffectual methods of assessment and still others made no effort to assess student learning at all. “While [the] University of Wisconsin-Stevens Point has made progress in assessment of student learning,” noted the HLC report, “it became apparent that the current campus culture does not appear to fully embrace assessment as an important ongoing and open campus-wide initiative” (Appendix A3: HLC Report 2008, p. 11).

Addressing this challenge has required engaging faculty and staff and supporting a change in the culture at UW-Stevens Point with respect to fostering a broader acceptance of assessment and a more purposeful use of evidence to evaluate and improve student learning. Predictably, the task has required patience, yet progress at UW-Stevens Point has been significant nonetheless.

The effort has been led by UW-Stevens Point’s Assessment Subcommittee (ASC). At the time, the ASC was solely responsible for providing coordination and oversight of assessment activities for both department-level academic programs and UW-Stevens Point’s General Degree Requirements. Recognizing that the university faced a long-term, labor-intensive task, the ASC’s first step was to suspend the regular submission of assessment reports by academic departments. This allowed both the ASC and faculty to devote the appropriate time and effort to reforming their assessment practices.

Gathering Information

In order to understand how best to approach this reform, members of the ASC began by educating themselves. First, during the fall 2008 semester, the committee studied Peggy Maki’s *Assessment for Learning: Building a Sustainable Commitment Across the Institution* (2004). Maki is among the nation’s leading authorities on the assessment of student learning, and her work not only provided the subcommittee a set of best practices, it also gave members a roadmap for creating the institutional structures necessary to improve UW-Stevens Point’s assessment effort. Second, to put this knowledge to work, the ASC reached out to departments across campus to gather information about their assessment practices and identify problems to be addressed. Working in teams of two to three, members of the subcommittee visited 15 departments during the spring 2009 semester, and then the remaining 17 departments during the following fall. Ahead of each discussion, departments were asked to consider the following questions:

1. What is your current departmental assessment process? How is your assessment data currently used by or incorporated into the department? Who does the work on assessment in the department?
2. What resources or assistance do you need to accomplish assessment in your department?
3. What roadblocks or hindrances are there in your assessment process?

The ASC documented the conversations and mined the information for common themes (see Appendix C1: ASC Findings from Department Meetings 2010 for more information). The subcommittee's findings from these visits confirmed the earlier report of the HLC team and added important details. In particular, the subcommittee learned that departments adhering to professional standards established by national organizations or accrediting agencies tended to have well-developed assessment processes, usually guided by articulated student learning outcomes. By contrast, many other departments, especially those with multiple academic programs or interdisciplinary majors, appeared to experience greater challenges in articulating learning outcomes and assessing student performance. Among the most hopeful findings was the tendency of nearly all departments at UW-Stevens Point to engage in informal assessment, a process in which faculty frequently discussed student learning within their programs—sometimes in the hallways and sometimes in department meetings. In many cases, such discussions led eventually to formal efforts to change the curriculum and improve student learning. Unfortunately, this kind of informal assessment was rarely well documented. Even more troubling, it was often disconnected entirely from UW-Stevens Point's formal assessment reporting structure. Nearly every department, for example, reported struggling to accommodate the required two-year reporting cycle, which left little time for faculty to implement and measure the impact of curricular changes between reports. As a result, UW-Stevens Point's existing assessment practices and procedures clearly failed to generate a reliable process of continuous improvement.

A Road Map for Reform

In exploring what resources and assistance departments needed to improve assessment, the ASC found that training topped the list of requested help. Among the suggested topics were how to write measureable student learning outcomes, how to choose valid assessment tools, and how to analyze and use the results. Many departments were interested in finding models of effective assessment processes, and almost all supported the provision of funding for assessment work, such as stipends or release time for department assessment coordinators.

Based on these year-long discussions with academic departments, the ASC began to rebuild UW-Stevens Point's academic program assessment effort from the ground up. It did so with the following goals in mind:

- To create a series of professional development opportunities for faculty on assessment-related topics in order to improve UW-Stevens Point's capacity to measure and improve student learning and bring every department on campus up to an acceptable level of proficiency.
- To establish a new assessment cycle that allowed departments more time to gather evidence of student learning, evaluate their curricula, and meaningfully utilize the information they obtained to make decisions regarding their programs, including integrating assessment into the ongoing program review process.
- To encourage an approach to assessment at UW-Stevens Point that recognized its relationship to the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning and its potential value in conversations related to professional development, innovative research, and faculty retention, promotion and tenure decisions.

To achieve these goals, the ASC provided the Faculty Senate with a proposed timeline that included clear expectations for departments to improve their assessment of student learning as well as step-by-step procedures by which the subcommittee would work to revise and improve the assessment cycle and reporting requirements. The Senate approved the timeline early in the spring 2010 semester.

Professional Development and Capacity Building

At the heart of this reform effort was a three-semester series of professional development workshops led by members of the subcommittee and labeled the UW-Stevens Point Assessment Academy. (See inset box below for the Academy agenda.) Each semester's workshops were aimed at encouraging departments to achieve clear objectives on a path toward improving their assessment programs. By the end of the spring 2010 semester, for example, the ASC with the Senate's endorsement asked all departments on campus to submit program learning outcomes to the subcommittee for each of its majors. Thus, the spring 2010 workshops were focused on writing learning outcomes. By the end of the fall 2010, departments were to develop and submit curriculum maps illustrating how students would achieve these outcomes through their curricula. Consequently, the fall 2010 workshops focused on curriculum mapping. Finally, by the end of the spring 2011 semester, departments were to develop and submit draft assessment plans showing how they intended to measure student learning in each of their programs. Thus, the spring 2011 workshops were focused accordingly on developing assessment plans. To carry out the workshops, members of the ASC collaborated with the Center for Academic Excellence and Student Engagement (CAESE), UW-Stevens Point's teaching and learning center. (For detailed information, please see Appendix D: Assessment Academy Workshops.)

Although participation in the Assessment Academy was voluntary, attendance was impressive, and it illustrated how genuinely concerned the university's faculty and staff are with improving student learning. The first series of workshops on program outcomes drew forty-six people from fourteen different departments. During the next two semesters, participation was even stronger with as many as seventy faculty and staff members attending. Even more important, the workshops were instrumental in helping academic programs comply with the Faculty Senate deadlines for completing the revision of their assessment efforts. Nearly every department on campus submitted program learning outcomes, curriculum maps and draft assessment plans by the requested dates, and those that failed to comply did so with the ASC's permission because of extenuating circumstances. At each stage in the process, members of the ASC reviewed the submitted work and provided feedback based on a common set of criteria that were articulated through rubrics. In this way, the ASC attempted to model good practice in assessment.

More than anything, the Assessment Academy workshops were instrumental in building the capacity of UW-Stevens Point's faculty and staff to assess student learning and utilize the results to improve in meaningful ways. In many departments, assessment was simply impossible because faculty had never formally articulated program learning outcomes. In this case, the workshops ensured first that faculty developed the skills to write outcomes that were meaningful, clearly articulated, and assessable; and second, that each department put these outcomes in place. In other departments, assessment proved difficult because faculty had yet to align their established outcomes with specific courses in their curricula. In these instances, the workshops provided faculty with guidance on curriculum mapping and the tools to carry out this exercise—from simple templates of courses and outcomes to a sophisticated, survey-based template developed by the UW-Stevens Point Office of Policy Analysis and Planning. Nearly every department on campus was in need of assistance to develop strategies for measuring student learning. Here, the workshops proved instrumental in helping faculty discover the many tools available for effective assessment. In particular, UW-Stevens Point invited Peggy Maki to campus in March 2011 to inaugurate the final series of workshops. Maki spent two days on campus, meeting with various groups of faculty including our First-Year Seminar instructors, the coordinators of our interdisciplinary programs, members of relevant governance committees, and administrators. She delivered a campus-wide lecture on her newly developed problem-based approach to assessment, and she led two separate workshops on assessment methods and measures: one for our Student Affairs units and a second for the academic departments in the sixth Assessment Academy workshop. Maki's expertise was invaluable, and she provided the campus with a broad variety of strategies to implement our assessment plans. (For more information, see Appendix D: Assessment Academy Workshops.)

In retrospect, the Assessment Academy workshops played a pivotal role in helping UW-Stevens Point to begin cultivating a culture of assessment. Faculty and staff had always invested a great deal of time and energy examining their courses, modifying their teaching strategies, and working to improve student learning. What the campus lacked, however, were the institutional (and departmental)

UWSP Assessment Academy

Program Learning Outcomes (Spring 2010)

- Session 1: Developing Learning Outcomes for Academic Programs (February 12, 2010)
- Session 2: Working with Program Learning Outcomes (March 12, 2010)
- Session 3: Aligning a Curriculum with Learning Outcomes (April 16, 2010)

Curriculum Mapping (Fall 2010)

- Session 1: Developing Curriculum Maps (October 8, 2010)
- Session 2: Working with Curriculum Maps (December 3, 2010)

Program Assessment Plans (Spring 2011)

- Session 1: From Outcomes and Maps to Developing a Plan to Assess Student Learning, facilitated by Peggy Maki (March 11, 2011)
- Session 2: Assessment Measures and Assessment Plans (April 8, 2011)

Table 2

“These workshops have deepened and broadened faculty and staff understanding of effective principles of assessment and have developed a shared understanding of and expectations for engagement in this process of intellectual inquiry.”

—Peggy Maki

[See: Appendix E2: Maki Site Visit Report 2011]

“It [the Academy] provided a structured, incremental approach that created both space and time for departments to create their own assessment processes. By breaking down the process in a series of steps over two years, these workshops reduced initial faculty resistance and encouraged faculty buy-in as tasks were seen as both valuable and doable.”

—UWSP Faculty Member

practices and policies necessary to ensure that these efforts took place systematically and that the results were captured and utilized on a continuing basis. By building from the ground up—working from best practices in writing program outcomes to creating full-fledged assessment plans—the ASC was able to build capacity for assessment among UWSP’s faculty and staff and to establish a level foundation upon which assessment can now take place.

This new foundation has benefitted both departments just beginning their assessment programs and those with established efforts interested in improving their practices. UW-Stevens Point’s Department of Biology, for example, had a longstanding reputation for outstanding teaching and strong student performance. Yet when members of the ASC visited the department during the spring 2009 semester, they found faculty largely ambivalent toward assessment and skeptical of its value in improving teaching and learning. Despite this ambivalence, however, when the UW-Stevens Point Assessment Academy began, members of the Biology faculty became enthusiastic participants, and the department sent a large team to each of the workshops. By the end of the experience, the department had clearly articulated program-learning outcomes, a nuanced curriculum map, and a developing plan for assessing student learning in its curriculum. The School of Education, by contrast, has long been among the units on campus with the strongest assessment programs, in part because the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction requires it as a condition of certifying graduates as public school teachers. Yet, members of the School of Education also participated in the Assessment Academy, using the opportunity to revise their program-learning outcomes to incorporate newly required professional dispositions, re-examine their curriculum in light of UW-Stevens Point’s pending revision of General Education, and strengthen their evaluation of student learning. In this way, the Assessment Academy workshops proved beneficial to departments with varying degrees of previous engagement with assessment.

New Policies and Procedures

While the ASC was assisting academic departments to revise their assessment programs, the subcommittee was also working to create a more robust framework of policy and procedures to support the effort. Most important, members of the ASC worked with colleagues on the Program Review Subcommittee (PRS) to revise UW-Stevens Point’s existing Reporting Cycle for Assessment and Program Review. Under the old requirements, each department was obligated to file an assessment report with the ASC every two years and to conduct a self-study and program review every eight years. Under these procedures, departments often struggled to effectively utilize assessment information for decision-making and curricular improvement. This was true for two reasons. First, the two-year reporting cycle left too little time for faculty to implement and measure the impact of curricular changes between reports. As a result, the biennial assessment reports frequently became mere exercises in compliance with little meaningful connection to the actual work of teaching and learning in the respective departments. Second, although assessment reports were required to be included in the program review self-studies compiled every eight years, they were typically simply included as

appendices and little effort was made to utilize their results in the self-study process, a shortcoming noted by the HLC team in 2008. “As part of its assessment activities, UW-Stevens Point conducts regular academic program reviews,” noted the HLC report. “However, based on material reviewed and subsequent interviews, there is perceived inconsistency among academic programs in terms of format, data collected, and content in program reviews,” especially regarding the use of assessment information (Appendix A3: HLC Report 2008, p. 11).

To correct these shortcomings in the policy structures underlying assessment at UW-Stevens Point, the ASC and PRS created a new five-year reporting cycle, which was approved by the Faculty Senate in the fall 2011 semester (Appendix C3: Reporting Cycle for 2011-21). Under these new requirements, departments will be expected to create assessment plans in which student learning is evaluated each year. But departments will report on their assessment only every five years, giving them adequate time between formal reports to effectively implement and evaluate the curricular changes they make to improve student learning. In addition, the ASC revised its procedures for collecting, reviewing, and disseminating assessment information gathered from departments to ensure greater transparency and more intentional efforts to utilize assessment results in decision making by faculty and administration. Finally, the PRS, now renamed the Department Review Subcommittee (DRS) revised its own reporting procedures. Self-study reviews are now required every ten years instead of eight to coincide with the assessment reporting cycle, and they must now include a separate review by external consultants similar to those conducted by accrediting organizations. Furthermore, departments are now obligated to utilize their assessment results as the foundation of their self-studies, ensuring that the improvement of student learning remains central to the process of decision-making within UW-Stevens Point’s academic units. In addition, departments will now be required to include an assessment of academic advising within their programs as part of their ten-year review, a change that further integrates assessment into the evaluation of teaching and learning at UW-Stevens Point.

Finally, UW-Stevens Point has carried the reform of its academic assessment into its non-academic programs as well. Assessment within Student Affairs was among UW-Stevens Point’s few recognized areas of strength in assessment at the time of our last HLC visit in 2008. First established in 2004, the process was reorganized in 2008 and placed under the leadership of a Student Affairs Assessment Team (SAAT). The process, based on an outcomes assessment model, involved departments submitting a written report, presenting the report publicly, and then receiving feedback from the SAAT via an agreed-upon rubric. The approach has been extremely successful; so much so, in fact, that beginning in the fall 2011 semester, it will be extended to include the many non-academic units outside of Student Affairs that would also benefit from regular evaluation of their activities. The SAAT will be reconstituted as the new Cross-Division Assessment Team (CDAT) and will coordinate an assessment process for a variety of units within Academic and Student Affairs.

Cross-Division Assessment Team	
Academic Affairs Units	Student Affairs Units
Career Services	Counseling Center
Student Academic Advising Center	Health Services
Disability Services	Multicultural Affairs
International Programs	Child Care Center
International Students and Scholars	Conference and Reservations Office
Admissions	University Dining Services
Orientation	Residential Living
Financial Aid Office	University Centers
Grant Support Services	Rights and Responsibilities Office
Continuing Education – Non Credit	
Information Technology	
Library	
Assistive Technology	
Tutoring-Learning Center	
Center for Academic Excellence and Student Engagement	

Table 3

Much like UW-Stevens Point's academic departments, the units overseen by CDAT will assess their activities on a five-year cycle through a process designed to ensure continuous improvement. In this way, the ASC and CDAT will work together functioning as separate, yet complementary, assessment committees.

A Shared Commitment

As a result of these reforms, UW-Stevens Point was able to resume its regular reporting cycle for academic program assessment beginning in the fall 2011 semester. The campus did so in a much stronger position than we occupied in 2008 when the HLC accreditation team visited the university. Each of our departments has clearly articulated program outcomes for its majors, a curriculum map describing the alignment of courses and outcomes, and an assessment plan for evaluating and improving student learning within their programs. Our Assessment Subcommittee has new policies and procedures to gather and review assessment reports, and the newly renamed Department Review Subcommittee has revised its own procedures to more effectively integrate assessment results into the ten-year program review process. Certainly, it will take time for UW-Stevens Point to implement fully this new approach to program assessment and review.

Departments will need to operationalize their assessment plans, working in turn with members of the ASC and DRS to improve their practices as they report to the respective subcommittees. Yet the progress that UW-Stevens Point has achieved is surely impressive, given where we began a few short years ago.

The most remarkable change to have taken place, however, is the growing appreciation among UW-Stevens Point's faculty and staff of the value of assessment in teaching and learning. "I was deeply impressed by faculty and other educators' commitment to assessment across the institution," wrote Peggy Maki, following her visit to UW-Stevens Point in March 2011. "Far too often in my work..., I see assessment of student learning as a mechanical process of gathering data solely to satisfy external demands of accreditors," she explained. "At UWSP there is clearly a shared commitment to assessment as a meaningful inquiry process that belongs to faculty and other educators—a view stated by Provost Nook, integrated into the language of the Assessment Sub-Committee's documents, demonstrated in the work of Student Affairs, and woven into the workshops the Sub-Committee has been offering to assure that all faculty and staff have a shared understanding of this institutional commitment" (Appendix E2: Maki Site Visit Report 2011).

Maki's evaluation captures perfectly the change taking place at UW-Stevens Point, as faculty and staff come to recognize the essential role that assessment should play in teaching and learning. This commitment, in turn, offers the best possible assurance that our program assessment efforts will continue to expand and improve in the years to come.

"[The Academy has] enlightened faculty overall with regard to assessment. Faculty view each course more as a contributor to the overall curriculum and not so much as a separate entity."

—UWSP Faculty Member

III. General Education and Degree Requirements

The revision of UW-Stevens Point's General Education Program has been one of the most visible and engaging aspects of our efforts to address the concerns raised by the Higher Learning Commission during our last accreditation visit. UW-Stevens Point had already begun to examine its existing General Degree Requirements (GDRs) by the time of the HLC's visit. Nonetheless, members of the HLC team were clear in criticizing several aspects of the program. For example, the report noted that "the large credit number [in the GDRs] appears to have a negative impact on course availability for students and... diminishes the ability of the institution to develop undergraduate programs particularly in professional and accredited areas." In addition, members of the HLC team reported that students were frequently dissatisfied with the GDRs and "do not recognize [their] value or intent." Finally, and most importantly, members of the HLC team noted that the GDRs were not defined by clearly articulated learning outcomes, which made student learning impossible to assess. Consequently, the report's final recommendation was clear: "As the university evaluates the GDRs it is encouraged to connect these requirements to university learning outcomes and to articulate its curricular commitment to liberal education to students" (Appendix A3: HLC Report 2008, p. 9).

The Beginnings of Reform

As noted above, UW-Stevens Point actually began the formal revision of its GDRs even before the HLC accreditation visit. In November 2006, prompted by suggestions from our own faculty and staff, UW-Stevens Point invited a team from the American Association of State Colleges and Universities (AASCU) to visit campus and review our GDRs. The AASCU team's report provided a lengthy list of issues requiring attention (see Appendix A5: AASCU Team Report 2006). "At the present time," noted the report, "some faculty members, students, and advisors seem uncertain about the purpose and value of the GDRs. In addition, many who talked with the AASCU Team about the GDRs spoke of disparate content areas rather than transferable skills" (A5: AASCU Team Report 2006, p. 16). Assessment of student learning within the GDRs was also problematic. Because the curriculum was divided into disparate content areas, each of which lacked clearly articulated learning outcomes, it was nearly impossible to evaluate student achievement in any meaningful way. Finally, the group also noted the difficulties created by UW-Stevens Point's governance structure, with one subcommittee dedicated to the approval of GDR courses, a second subcommittee charged with assessment of student learning in the curriculum, and yet a third committee tasked

with establishing the structure and academic standards of the program. This fragmented system of oversight created too many obstacles to effective communication and management of the GDRs.

Following this review, a small team of UW-Stevens Point faculty members was employed during the summer of 2007 to study the AASCU report's conclusions, and more important, to make recommendations on how to move forward with a formal revision of the GDRs. In particular, this GDR Research Team explored the kinds of processes that are typically employed in the reform of general education. Among the characteristics of successful reform efforts, the team identified the following common traits:

- The process is led by a coordinating team appointed specifically for the task, usually by the provost and/or chancellor
- The coordinating team finds a variety of ways to involve faculty throughout the process, in special meetings and faculty governance committees
- The process is open and transparent to the university community
- Students are involved in the process in ways appropriate at the institution
- The process is faculty-driven
- Most importantly, the process must be allowed to take time, precisely because of the openness and campus involvement typically required to ensure its success.

Based on this analysis, the Research Team recommended the appointment of a general education reform committee at UW-Stevens Point, broadly representative of campus constituencies and empowered to lead the creation of a new curriculum with measurable learning outcomes through an open, transparent, faculty-driven process. (For more information, see Appendix A4: UWSP Gen Ed Research Team Report 2007.)

A Formal Process

Acting on these recommendations, the UW-Stevens Point Faculty Senate created the General Education Policy Review Committee (GEPRC) to assume responsibility for helping the campus create a new General Education Program (GEP). The committee was structured to provide broad representation of the campus community. Membership consisted of one faculty member from each of UW-Stevens Point's four colleges; one representative each from the university's Academic Affairs Committee and Assessment Subcommittee; a representative from the Student Academic Advising Center; and two representatives of the Student Government Association. Later, a representative from the Provost's office was added to ensure a direct line of communication on administrative issues related to general education.

Charge to the GEPRC:

- Articulate the mission of the General Education Program (GEP) at UWSP
- Identify the General Education model (core, distribution, decentralized) that UWSP will follow
- Develop the Explicit Goals and Learning Objectives of the General Education Program (GEP) at UWSP
- Specify Measurable Outcomes of the GEP at UWSP
- Develop the General Education Program (GEP) which should include creating clear criteria for meeting the learning objectives (for example: criteria for course approval)
- Develop an appropriate title for the General Education Program (GEP) that focuses on the value of the GEP
- Determine the advisability of appointing a Director of General Education at UWSP

Table 4

Faculty Senate Process for General Education Reform

- Step 1: Mission
- Step 2: Program Goals and Outcomes
- Step 3: Model (Core, Distribution, other.)
- Step 4: Structural Components and Learning Outcomes
- Step 5: Course Criteria
- Step 6: Administration (including assessment)

Shortly thereafter, the Faculty Senate created a six-step process which GEPRC was required to follow in creating the new General Education Program. The process was designed to provide structure to the campus conversation concerning General Education. In particular, by moving logically from discussing the broad goals and learning outcomes of the General Education Program to more detailed debates about curriculum and administration, the process was intended to focus debate on pedagogical issues while at the same time limiting the kinds of resource-related disagreements that often threaten to derail general education reform. In so doing, it helped to foster broader participation in the conversation and broader support of the reform effort itself. In retrospect, no single aspect of UW-Stevens Point's general education revision was more important to the success we have achieved than the decision to proceed through this six-step process.

Early Achievements

The completion of Steps 1, 2, and 3 took place relatively quickly, in May 2008, February 2009, and April 2009, respectively. Members of GEPRC followed the lead of many other universities nationwide in looking to the American Association of Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) initiative entitled Liberal Education and America's Promise (LEAP). First begun in 2005, LEAP provides a framework for adapting the concepts of a liberal education to the needs of a rapidly changing global society. (See www.aacu.org/leap for more information.) In particular, the essential learning outcomes outlined in the LEAP initiative served as a model for the mission statement and program outcomes developed for UWSP's new General Education Program. Although the current General Degree Requirements in place at UW-Stevens Point were defined by thirteen "skills and types of knowledge," these broad standards were never written as learning outcomes and consequently failed to provide a strong foundation for the assessment of student learning in the curriculum. The mission statement and program goals and outcomes approved for the new GEP, by contrast, provide a clear statement of the purpose of general education at UW-Stevens Point, and clearly defined, measurable outcomes against which the success of the new curriculum can be evaluated.

Next, members of GEPRC recommended the campus adopt a distribution model in shaping the GEP. In making this recommendation, the committee considered three broad approaches: a core model in which students are required to complete a prescribed set of common courses; a distribution model in which students are free to choose their courses from various menus divided by category, each of which has been approved by a central governing committee to fulfill a certain type of general education credit; and a decentralized model in which the various colleges and/or departments would be permitted to craft their own general education requirements which their respective majors would be required to fulfill. Although creating a common core would offer significant advantages for assessment, the committee believed that staffing difficulties at institutions as large as UW-Stevens Point made this approach untenable. Likewise, although the decentralized approach offered the greatest flexibility to departments and programs in structuring a general education curriculum, the committee believed that such a structure would create challenges for achieving a coherent model of liberal education and make

Table 5

assessment of student learning nearly impossible. By contrast, adopting a distribution model built around clearly defined, measurable learning outcomes appeared to offer the most flexibility while at the same time ensuring that meaningful assessment could still take place. (For details, see Appendix B5: GEP Step 3.)

UWSP General Education Program

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.

At UWSP, we believe that a liberal education is essential to living in today's global society. We also believe that global citizenship requires that individuals learn to see the world from perspectives other than their own. Some of these perspectives are cultural and develop from the study of other languages, ethnicities, and beliefs. Some perspectives come from honing new intellectual skills, by learning math and science, for example, or cultivating an understanding of the past and an appreciation of the arts and literature. And some perspectives are the products of unique experiences such as getting involved in a community or studying abroad.

Ultimately, the more students are encouraged to step outside their familiar habits and beliefs, the more they gain the wisdom to see connections between themselves and the world around them, the generosity to empathize with the differences they encounter, and the willingness to place their newfound abilities in the service of a larger community. In this way, a liberal education at UWSP prepares students to be responsible global citizens.

Program Outcomes

The General Education Program seeks to develop these qualities of global citizenship in four distinct ways. After completing the general education curriculum, students will:

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

Figure 1

An Open, Collaborative Process

In providing its initial charge to GEPRC, the Faculty Senate encouraged members of the committee to establish an open, collaborative process of reform. “As a community of scholars, we value the input of all members of UW-Stevens Point in reviewing and revising our General Education curriculum,” noted the Senate. “To that extent, we encourage you to embrace the following guidelines: open communication with all faculty and staff during the process; opportunities for input from all parts of the campus; [and] honest and fair consideration of recommendations and suggestions.” Throughout the review process, members of GEPRC have adhered to these guidelines, and their efforts help to explain how the creation of the new GEP has proceeded so successfully despite many difficult conversations.

To ensure adequate review of GEPRC proposals, the Faculty Senate established some minimum expectations for gathering feedback from the campus. At each step in the process, for example, the committee was instructed to submit a draft proposal to the campus by email and to gather comments for at least one week. Feedback was to be gathered through a committee website, by email, and from at least one open forum at which members of the campus community were invited to ask questions and offer advice regarding the proposal under review. Members of GEPRC were then expected to consider these comments and make revisions where necessary before formally submitting the proposal to the Academic Affairs Committee (AAC), which would then vote on the proposal, deciding either to send it back to GEPRC for further revision or submit the proposal to the Faculty Senate for consideration and approval.

In practice, members of GEPRC went far beyond these minimum expectations in attempting to seek and incorporate ideas from the campus into the new General Education Program. Proposals were submitted to campus not simply once, but multiple times, with each successive draft revised based on campus feedback. A GEPRC website was established to communicate with the campus, providing information on approved and pending proposals, ongoing conversations among committee members, and cataloging the concerns and comments of faculty and staff from across campus (<https://committees.uwsp.edu/gedpolrev/default.aspx>). Feedback on committee proposals was gathered through postings to discussion forums on the website, by email, and through numerous open meetings at which faculty and staff were invited to share their thoughts. Throughout the reform process, members of GEPRC worked continuously to inform the university community and invite faculty and staff to participate in creating the new curriculum.

Learning Outcomes and Course Criteria

This open, collaborative process was crucial to completing the two most difficult and potentially contentious steps involved in creating a new General Education Program at UW-Stevens Point: writing the learning outcomes that would define general education and determining the criteria by which courses would be

approved for inclusion in the curriculum. Put another way, the university had to determine first what students should learn from the new General Education Program, and second how and by whom the approved learning outcomes would be taught.

In crafting the learning outcomes for the GEP—Step 4 in the Faculty Senate process—members of GEPRC moved deliberately in stages. The committee’s first proposal, in fact, asked the university community to consider only the broad categories that might serve to structure the curriculum. The proposal was comprised of three sections: 1) a graphic representation of the structural components of the curriculum; 2) an explanation of the structure proposed; and 3) a curriculum map suggesting how each component might be linked to the Program Outcomes already approved by the Faculty Senate.

In proposing this structure, the committee sought to create a program that functioned as cohesive curriculum: in other words, one that not only was defined by clear learning outcomes, but also that required students to move logically from the introduction and development of these outcomes toward their potential mastery and was connected as seamlessly as possible to the degrees and majors that students pursue. Consequently, under the committee’s proposal, students would begin with a series of courses, including a First-Year Seminar (FYS), that introduced them to academic study at the university and the skills they would need to pursue their educations. The FYS would also serve to articulate UW-Stevens Point’s curricular commitment to liberal education as had been noted in the 2008 HLC visit.

Students would then proceed through courses aimed at developing these skills and introducing the core methodologies necessary to understand the physical, social, and cultural worlds. Having acquired this knowledge and basic skills, students would then proceed into more specialized coursework aimed at developing the personal, social, and environmental responsibility by which the Faculty Senate had defined global citizenship at UW-Stevens Point. These courses would include several organized by themes and intended to carry general education into upper-level coursework in which students could apply what they had learned in the context of a topic of their choosing. Finally, a capstone seminar in the major would serve as a culminating experience.

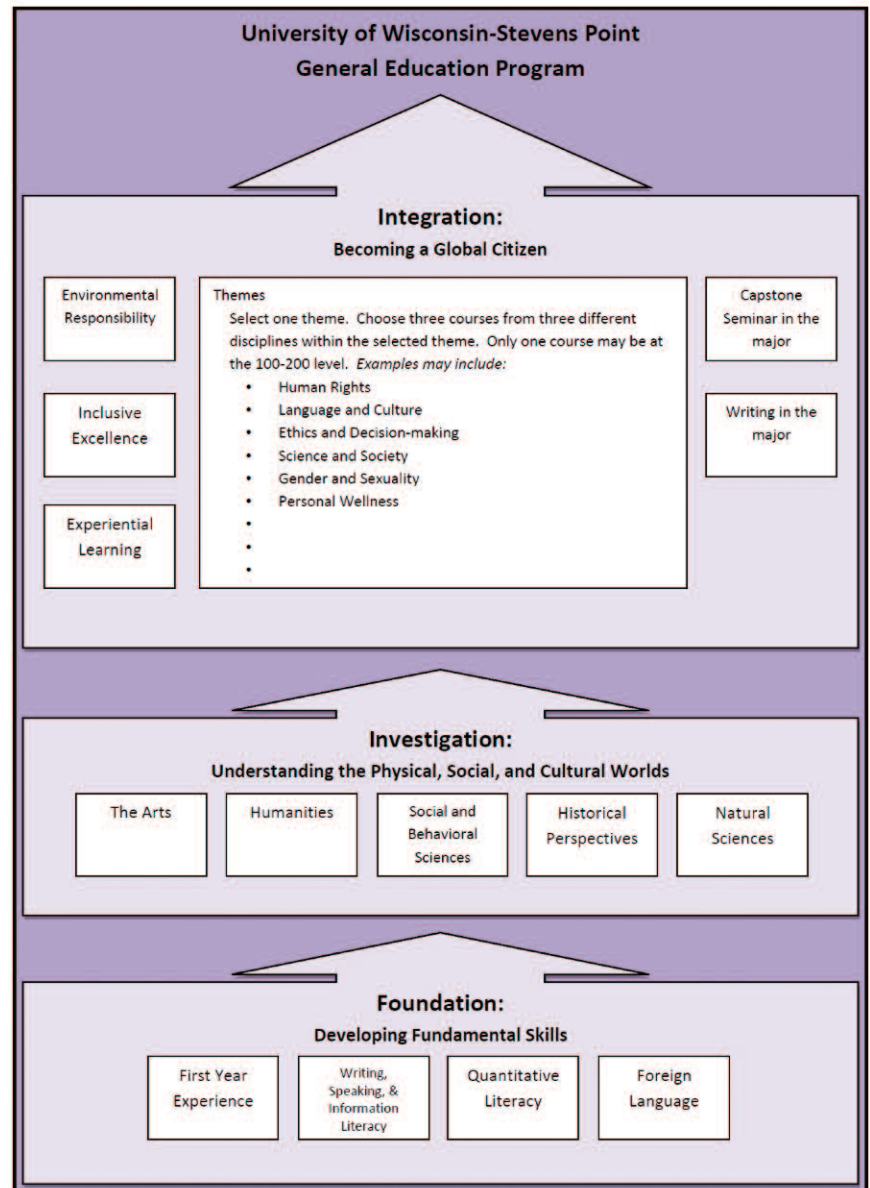


Figure 2

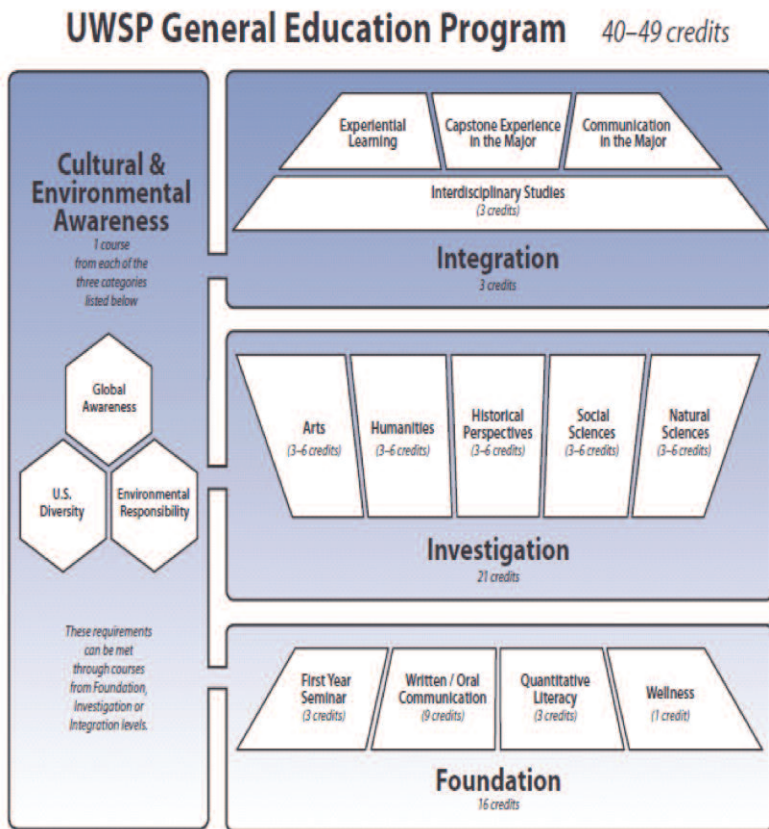


Figure 3

Combined, the various components of this structure would make possible a well-defined curriculum that moved far beyond the simple menu of courses that comprise UW-Stevens Point's current General Degree Requirements. Instead, students would fulfill the GEP Outcomes in a purposeful, step-by-step manner in which courses could build logically on one another, moving from introduction through development and toward mastery of the intended learning outcomes. This structure would also provide numerous opportunities for departments and programs to build on the knowledge and skills that students would acquire through the GEP.

Not surprisingly, this initial GEPRC proposal generated a great deal of conversation across campus over the course of the next year. In its second draft, labeled Step 4b, members of GEPRC made significant changes to the structural components of the program and added draft learning outcomes for each area of the curriculum. The third draft included more revisions to the structural components, revised learning outcomes, and a new element: a proposed credit distribution

describing how much coursework in each area of the curriculum that students would be required to take. The committee's fourth version of the proposal contained revisions to all these aspects of the program, and it was this draft, labeled Step 4d, that was approved by Faculty Senate in March 2010. (For details, see Appendix B7: GEP Step 4.)

Debate among faculty and staff took place on a large number and great variety of questions. Several topics generated especially lengthy conversations, among them: the role and structure of the First-Year Seminar; the relative place of subjects such as Foreign Languages, Quantitative Literacy, and Wellness in the curriculum; the best means of integrating critical thinking, cultural diversity, and interdisciplinary studies into the program; the precise requirements and level of expectations suggested by the learning outcomes; and the appropriate relationship between general education and academic majors at UW-Stevens Point. In each case, members of GEPRC sought to listen carefully to campus feedback and seek meaningful compromise among competing interests. Although few people were likely entirely satisfied with every aspect of the final proposal, the language eventually approved by the Faculty Senate nonetheless represented a broad, collective vision of what students should know, do, value and appreciate when they complete the General Education Program at UW-Stevens Point.

Having decided on the structural components and learning outcomes of the new GEP, the campus then turned its attention to defining the criteria by which courses would be approved for inclusion in the curriculum. This, too, proved a lengthy process that required extensive conversations among faculty and staff.

Without question, the most difficult aspect of this task was defining the appropriate instructor qualifications for teaching within each area of the new curriculum. With this issue, the committee was pulled in two seemingly opposite directions. On the one hand, the growing emphasis on assessment and learning outcomes in higher education suggested that outputs rather than inputs should be paramount in defining and evaluating a curriculum. By this logic, any instructor able to demonstrate an ability to teach the approved learning outcomes should be qualified in a given category. On the other hand, however, it was equally clear that inputs like instructor qualifications still have an important—and perhaps the most important—role in shaping the desired outcome of a given class.

Established practice at UW-Stevens Point made navigating this tension difficult. Under the present General Degree Requirements (GDRs), UW-Stevens Point has been governed by relatively inflexible rules regarding which instructors are permitted to teach in each GDR category. Many of the GDRs themselves are labeled using department names, including Freshman English, Mathematics, Communication, History, and Foreign Language. Beyond this implicit restriction, the only instance in which instructor qualifications are explicitly stated in the Handbook is in the Social Science area, which specifies that “Category 1 courses must be offered from the departments of Business/Economics (Economics only), Geography/Geology (Cultural Geography only), Philosophy/Anthropology (Anthropology only), Political Science, Psychology, and Sociology.” Other faculty are permitted to teach Social Science classes, but only under the “Category 2” label.

As members of GEPRC noted, this manner of attaching ownership of the GDRs to individual departments is out of step with current practices in general education, in part because it makes the assessment and continuous improvement of the curriculum extremely difficult. This issue was specifically cited as problematic by the American Association of State Colleges and Universities (AASCU) team that reviewed our GDRs in 2006, and it was noted as well by the team from the Higher Learning Commission during our last accreditation visit. As a result, in crafting proposals for the new GEP, members of GEPRC sought consistently to avoid using department names as titles for the components of the new general education curriculum, proposing for example to require Quantitative Literacy rather than Mathematics and Historical Perspectives rather than History. The committee did this deliberately in the hope of avoiding conversation about “ownership” of the curriculum until after the campus had defined the learning outcomes that would comprise the GEP.

Once the Faculty Senate approved these learning outcomes, however, the question of instructor qualifications had to be addressed. For help in navigating this difficult issue, the committee turned to UW-Stevens Point’s faculty and staff, conducting an online survey for two weeks during March 2010. (For more information, see Appendix B08: GEP Results of Step 5 Survey of Faculty.) The survey asked faculty to select which areas of the new curriculum they were most interested in teaching and what factors were most important in defining course criteria in those areas. The responses showed clearly how difficult it was to define ownership of any particular area of the new curriculum by instructor qualifications or department memberships. Among those who advised GEPRC on this question,

*“Keep turf out of the formula....
Our past system allowed approval
of courses by faculty who had no
training or experience in the
areas in which they were trying to
offer a course. Other faculty
courses were precluded because
they were not in the right
department or college.
This must stop.”*

*--response to GEPRC
Step 5 Survey*

“Yes, a person might be able on paper to “meet learning outcomes” as defined by the gen ed committee, but a person must also be able to demonstrate they have the qualifications to teach in the area they are proposing. Otherwise, a person in history who also speaks Spanish could propose a language course. Equally, a person in the sciences might propose a “history of science class,” but are they qualified and experienced in how to conduct historical research and/or teach history?”

*--response to GEPRC
Step 5 Survey*

some respondents urged the committee to keep “turf” and department memberships out of the criteria while others insisted that instructor qualifications were paramount and should be defined as precisely as possible.

Given that both points of view had merit, the committee sought to find a middle ground between the potential extremes: in other words, to define criteria precisely enough to ensure qualified instructors but not so rigidly that capable instructors would be excluded from teaching in a given area solely because they lack particular degrees or department memberships. As one faculty member described the problem, “it would be appropriate to allow a mechanism to recognize expertise acquired and demonstrated through some means other than a degree program in unusual cases, but not to open [the] door wide.”

The solution proposed by the committee was to vest “ownership” of the curriculum in a new General Education Committee (GEC) as a standing committee of the Faculty Senate. (The current GDR Subcommittee is situated beneath Senate’s Curriculum Committee and has much more limited authority.) The GEC, in turn, will be expected to review all course proposals for inclusion in the GEP and to look specifically at instructor qualifications. According to the criteria eventually approved by the Senate, the new GEC would be charged with ensuring that instructors in each category of the curriculum possess “teaching, research, or professional expertise in an appropriate area of study in order to satisfy the relevant learning outcomes.” If there is a question, the committee will be expected to review the instructor’s curriculum vitae. Following this review, if uncertainty still exists among members of the GEC, the committee is then required to seek advice from appropriate departments before rendering a decision.

New Degree Requirements

Meanwhile, as the campus community worked to approve Steps 4 and 5 in the General Education reform process, a second committee was also working to define the new degree requirements needed to implement the GEP. When the Faculty Senate approved the use of a distribution model to structure the new general education curriculum in Step 3, it also approved two additional proposals from GEPRC. First, members of GEPRC suggested that the GEP apply uniformly to all students regardless of degree type. This recommendation marked a significant departure from UWSP’s current practice in which the differences among degree types (Bachelor of Arts, Bachelor of Science, Bachelor of Music, and Bachelor of Fine Arts) are literally built into the structure of the GDRs. In other words, under the GDRs, the university essentially has four distinct general education programs, one for each degree type. Members of GEPRC hoped to end this practice by creating a General Education Program that was truly “general.” Second, the Faculty Senate decided that new university-level degree requirements should be created to replace the four distinct sets of standards embedded in the GDRs. The Senate assigned this task to the Academic Affairs Committee, GEPRC’s parent committee.

The Academic Affairs Committee (AAC) spent nearly two years working on this issue before creating a proposal that was approved by both the Faculty Senate and the Chancellor. (An initial proposal that was approved by Faculty Senate in 2010 was rejected by the Interim Chancellor at that time due to concerns raised by ambiguous language. A second, revised proposal was eventually approved by both Faculty Senate and the Chancellor the next year.)

Separating the degree requirements from general education turned out to be an enormously complicated task, in large part because of the long history at UW-Stevens Point of thinking about and treating the two sets of requirements as integrated. Under the current system, both students and faculty are restricted from exercising any control over the pedagogical content of their degrees. Students in many departments, for example, often choose between the Bachelor of Arts and the Bachelor of Science degree based on whether they wish to avoid taking a foreign language or additional credits of mathematics and science, not on their understanding of the learning outcomes or educational goals inherent in the two degrees. Faculty within these departments, for their part, are also excluded from these decisions and have little opportunity to shape a student’s degree path either through advising or structuring their curricula to meet particular learning outcomes. The net result of this scheme is problematic on several levels. In particular, there is currently no mechanism to ensure that the GDR courses selected by a particular student actually support the learning outcomes of the major. Equally troubling, the lack of intentional cohesion between the GDRs and academic program learning outcomes makes assessment of student learning almost impossible.

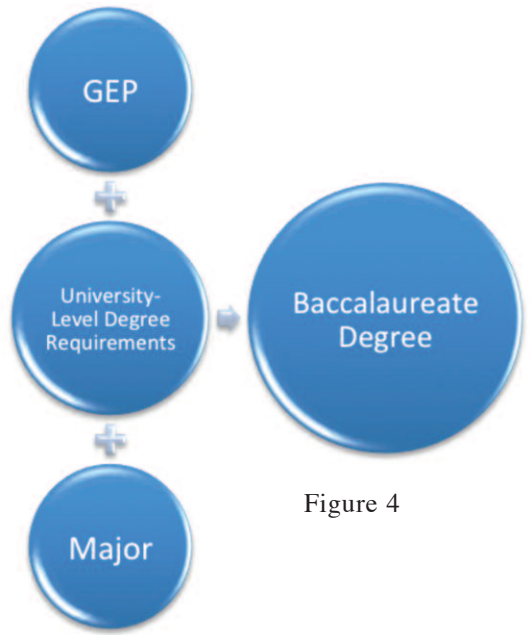


Figure 4

As members of the AAC began examining college degree definitions across the nation, they quickly realized that there is no standard definition of the various degree types offered in the United States. Each institution defines them differently. Some institutions offer only a Bachelor of Arts for all majors, defining it as a liberal arts degree. Others define the Bachelor of Science as a degree for applied majors. The committee also found numerous examples of institutions where the degree types are defined at the university, college, and department level.

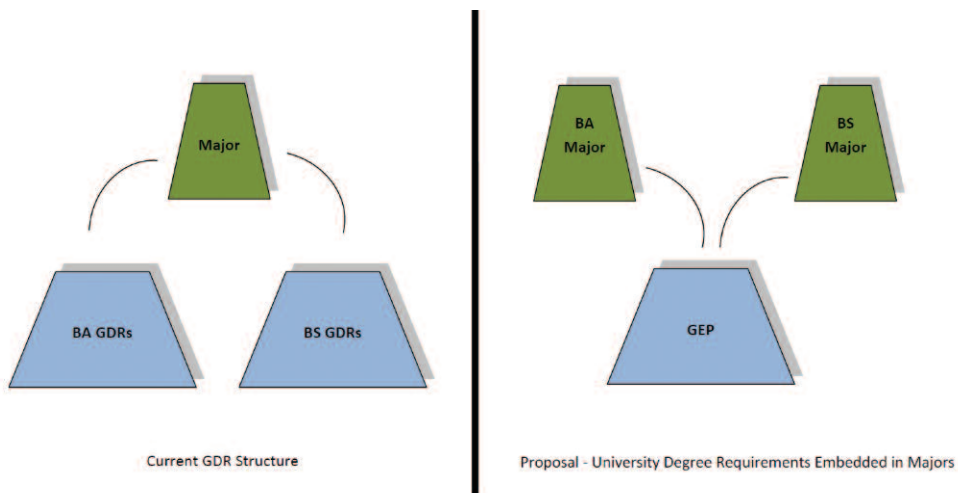


Figure 5

Although the Faculty Senate directed that UW-Stevens Point's degree definitions be determined at the university-level, the AAC proposed defining these standards broadly enough to allow them to serve as general guidelines only, placing the implementation of the degree requirements within the individual departments. Departments would have both the right and the responsibility of choosing the degree type that most closely corresponds with their own academic mission and the disciplinary needs of their students. If a department offers more than one degree program, with substantially different goals and departmental requirements from each other, then the department would have the option to distinguish between these tracks by defining them as different degree types with distinct program learning outcomes. Assessment of degree requirements would also take place within the individual departments.

Put another way, whereas currently the degree requirements are embedded in the GDRs, the new system proposed by AAC and approved by the Faculty Senate in May 2011 embeds the degree requirements within the major, albeit still governed by broad university-level standards. (For more information, see Appendix B10: UWSP Degree Requirements.)

IV. Assessment of General Education

The assessment of student learning within the general education curriculum has been among the most complicated aspects of UW-Stevens Point's effort to prepare for the focused visit of the Higher Learning Commission. UW-Stevens Point has a scattered history of assessing student learning in the current General Degree Requirements (GDRs). In part, this is due to the decentralized way in which the curriculum is divided among the university's departments. "The structure of the GDR has proven to be an impediment to the development of meaningful assessments," noted the AASCU site visit team in its 2006 report (Appendix A5: AASCU Team Report 2006, p. 8). "The GDR has 13 goals, many of which are compounded. That is, goals for transferable skills (critical thinking, literacy, etc.) are embedded in content specific (and departmentally specific) contexts" (Appendix A5: AASCU Team Report 2006, p. 8). In addition, although responsibility for assessing learning in the GDRs resides with the Assessment Subcommittee, unfortunately, the subcommittee's workload makes it virtually impossible to carry out a comprehensive system of evaluating student achievement. Even more problematic, the divided authority over the GDRs within the current faculty governance structure creates little formal opportunity to use any information that might be gathered to improve the general education curriculum. "There was little communication between the General Degree Requirement subcommittee and the Assessment Subcommittee," reported the HLC site visit team in 2008 (Appendix A3: HLC Report 2008, p. 10). In fact, the only time when our current governance process allows assessment information to be utilized to improve the curriculum is on the floor of the Faculty Senate itself, a scenario that rarely lends itself to efficiently closing the loop. Consequently, the conclusion of the HLC team was clear. "UWSP would be well advised to examine and put in place a process that ensures appropriate assessments and reviews for all academic programs and curricula," including general education (Appendix A3: HLC Report 2008, p. 10).

The HLC Academy for the Assessment of Student Learning

The task of creating this process was assumed initially by a small group of faculty and staff called the HLC Assessment Academy Team (HLCAAT). Shortly after our last accreditation visit, UW-Stevens Point agreed to participate in the HLC's Academy for the Assessment of Student Learning, a four-year focused process in which the campus takes on a major improvement project related to assessment and receives regular support and advice from HLC faculty mentors and fellow participants in the academy. For our improvement project, UW-Stevens Point's team was charged by the Provost to tackle the challenge of assessing student learning in its new General Education Program.

The HLCAAT has been actively meeting since 2008 (see Appendix E4: Link to HLCAAT Minutes). The team's first task was simply to gather information on best practices in the assessment of general education programs. To do so, members of the team have attended a variety of regional and national conferences on the topic, including the HLC Annual Conference and its Assessment Academy Roundtables, the Annual Conference on the First-Year Experience sponsored by the National Resource Center on the First-Year Experience and Students in Transition, and several conferences on general education and assessment sponsored by the American Association of Colleges and Universities. One member of UW-Stevens Point's team is also a Teagle Assessment Scholar and participates regularly as a mentor in workshops as part of the 2010 Wabash National Study sponsored by the Center of Inquiry in the Liberal Arts at Wabash College. (See www.liberalarts.wabash.edu/ for more information.)

Based on what they learned at these conferences and workshops, and with the help of regular feedback from our mentors in the HLC Assessment Academy, the team has gradually developed a plan for the assessment of student learning within the new General Education Program that fits the unique culture and priorities of UW-Stevens Point. In developing this proposal, members of the HLCAAT sought to transcend simplistic efforts to measure and report learning in order to create an approach to assessment that truly improves student learning and success. The resulting plan—built on evidence collected through a problem-based approach, the reporting of this evidence in course portfolios, and the evaluation of these portfolios by faculty learning communities—achieves this goal. Under this innovative approach, 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

Assessment Teams under the direction of the General Education Committee, a new Director of General Education, and a new 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. The Center for Academic Excellence and Student Engagement, meanwhile, will assist faculty with implementing the recommendations made by the committee. In this way, assessment at UW-Stevens Point will become not simply an exercise in compliance, but rather a collaborative, reflective process of inquiry about teaching and learning, conducted by faculty and aimed squarely at improving student achievement.

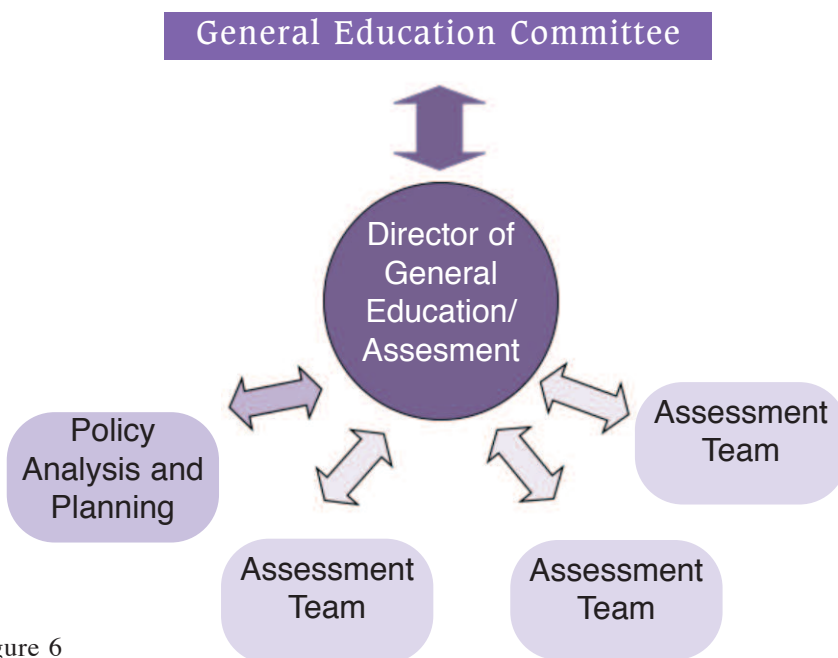


Figure 6

This plan was shared with members of the General Education Policy Review Committee (GEPRC) over the summer months in 2011, and it has now been circulated to the university community as part of the GEPRC's Step 6 proposal. (For more information, see Appendix B11: GEP Step 6b Implementation and Assessment (final proposal).)

Institutional-Level Assessment

The proposed General Education Assessment Plan begins with establishing a strong foundation of institutional-level assessment data, including regular utilization of value-added measures. UW-Stevens Point has periodically used standardized testing in the past (specifically the Collegiate Assessment of Academic Proficiency, CAAP) administered by the Office of Policy Analysis and Planning. More recently, in response to rising external calls for accountability, the university has begun participation in the national Voluntary System of Accountability (VSA) effort. In March 2010, the 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. In order to utilize the test for general education assessment and not just the VSA, the sample sizes required will need to be larger than the minimum requirements (200 freshmen and 200 seniors) established by testing standards.

UW-Stevens Point also has a history of participating in other surveys, including the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE), as part of the University of Wisconsin System's effort to ensure accountability. These tests, too, are administered 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. In this context, questions from the NSSE have been mapped onto UW-Stevens Point's new General Education learning outcomes in order to inform the overall assessment effort. (For more information, please see Appendix E5: Institutional Map of Surveys.)

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, under the proposed Assessment Plan, 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.

Why a Problem-Based Approach to Assessment?

As already noted, the proposed GE Assessment Plan suggests that faculty collect course-based evidence through a problem-based approach, that they report this evidence in course portfolios, and finally that they evaluate these portfolios within faculty learning communities.

The idea of employing a problem-based approach to assessment is drawn from recent scholarship by Peggy Maki, among the nation's leading experts on the assessment of student learning. 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 by embedding assessment work in faculty-inspired questions that arise naturally from their own experience in the classroom and their own curiosity as teachers and scholars. If approached in this way, assessment is immediately instilled with greater relevance and meaning than simple reporting would normally encourage. Consequently, it becomes much more likely that the results of assessment can and will be utilized for continuous improvement. (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.)

Among the greatest benefits of this problem-based approach to assessment is that it so closely resembles the scholarly process with which most faculty are already intuitively familiar. 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 already utilize in their disciplinary research to investigate student learning in their classrooms.

The open-ended, yet grounded nature by which this kind of inquiry proceeds 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 (one of UW-Stevens Point's new General Education courses) and attempting to gather information related to its central learning outcome: 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. 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. Moreover, because faculty learning communities will be employed, even richer conversations can be had about the construct of critical thinking, how best to teach it, and how to assess students’ learning. These conversations will provide another layer of faculty development and community engagement with the curriculum.

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 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); www.courseportfolio.org, a website sponsored by the University of Nebraska-Lincoln; and <http://web.wm.edu/sacs/pies/GER/?svr=www>, the General Education assessment website of the College of William and Mary.)

Under the HLCAAT proposal, 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 will contain the following elements:

1. Course Information:
 - a. A syllabus, including intended learning outcomes aligned with those of the General Education Program.
 - 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. Three 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 the assignment for which the three examples are provided.
- 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.

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 UW-Stevens Point.

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.

Evaluating Assessment Data through Faculty Learning Communities

Within each category of the new General Education curriculum, the evaluation of course portfolios will be facilitated by the Assessment Coordinator working in conjunction with an a small group of faculty who teach in the category under review. Together, they will form a faculty learning community that will function as an Assessment Team.

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.

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—labeled Assessment Teams in the HLCAAT proposal—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 will be 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.

Under this procedure, each faculty learning community (Assessment Team) 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 General Education Committee (GEC). Based on this information, the committee will make decisions about potential changes to the GEP, and it will work with the Center for Academic Excellence and Student Engagement (CAESE) to continue to support faculty members in implementing its decisions.

The roles of the GEC and CAESE in this assessment process are especially important in that each addresses a critical failing in UW-Stevens Point's current GDR assessment effort. As already noted, in our current governance structure, the authority over the GDRs is subdivided among at least three separate committees in addition to the various academic departments that provide the courses themselves. This is especially problematic for assessment, since the only opportunity where assessment information might realistically be utilized for the improvement of the GDR program is on the floor of the Faculty Senate. To correct this inefficient, disconnected structure, the Faculty Senate created a new standing committee called the General Education Committee to replace the former GDR Subcommittee. Beginning in fall 2011, the new body will 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. This new, more cohesive structure for governance oversight creates the equivalent of an academic department to manage the GEP, and it will provide for the much more efficient use of assessment information to improve student learning in the curriculum.

Likewise, the role of CAESE, UW-Stevens Point's teaching and learning center, will also be instrumental in ensuring the success of our new GE assessment plan. As early as 2006, the AASCU site visit team had recommended expanding the role of CAESE in "closing the loop" within the assessment process. "Once assessment of student learning has identified the particular [general education] competencies in which students most need improvement, [CAESE] could become one of the most important means for helping faculty to make changes in the classroom that would effect this improvement," the report suggested. "[CAESE] is already off to a fine start, conducting workshops on infusing diversity into the curriculum, incorporating service learning in courses, and using technology in the classroom," noted the AASCU team. "If the university were to forge a formal link between [general education] assessment results and [CAESE] workshops, then faculty would have a place to go in order to hear inspiring speakers, join discussion sessions, and locate print and web resources on improving student learning in specific GDR competencies. Workshops could be offered whenever assessment results indicate a need for one in any given [general education] competency area. Attendance at these workshops could become an effective and invigorating way for faculty to be exposed to the latest research on teaching and learning" (Appendix A5: AASCU Team Report 2006, p. 17).

V. Implementing the New GEP

In fact, this is exactly what members of the HLCAAT have proposed in their General Education assessment plan. Despite the fact that the new General Education Program (GEP) will not be implemented fully until the fall 2013 semester, UW-Stevens Point has moved ahead with launching key aspects of the program, including developing new courses, adjusting program curricula to accommodate new requirements, and providing faculty and departments the assistance and administrative support they need to begin incorporating the GEP learning outcomes into their courses. Taken together, these efforts have moved UW-Stevens Point significantly down the road toward fully implementing the new program.

Resources and Administrative Support

A principal aim of the reforms put in place at UW-Stevens Point thus far is to ensure that assessment takes place within a clearly-defined governance and administrative structure. Under the procedures now established, program-level assessment will be carried out by academic departments that report to the current Assessment Subcommittee; the assessment of general education, meanwhile, will be the responsibility of the new General Education Committee; 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 newly restructured Center for Academic Excellence and Student Engagement (CAESE) 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.

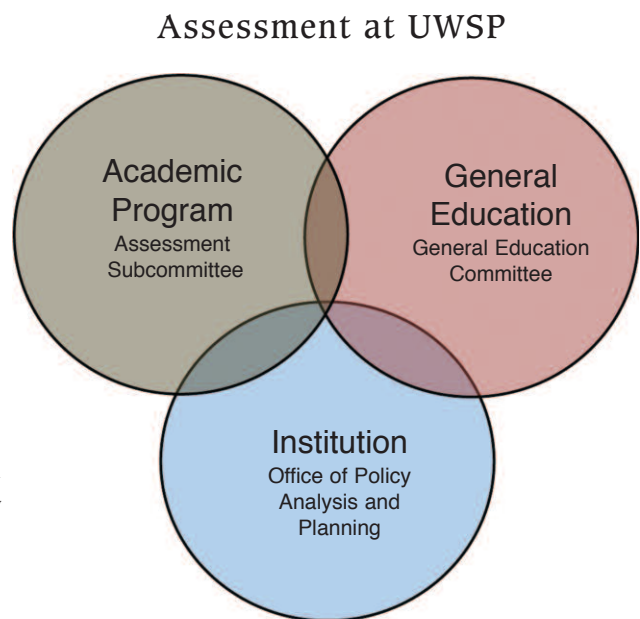


Figure 7

Governance

Under the previous governance structure, the Assessment Subcommittee, with the aid of the Office of Policy Analysis and Planning, was entirely responsible for the assessment of general education. This included not only the collection and analysis of assessment data, but the use of this information as well. In practice, the Assessment Subcommittee was never able to manage general education assessment on top of its responsibilities to oversee assessment in the academic programs.

To help remedy this situation, the General Education Committee—a new standing committee of the Faculty Senate which replaced the former GDR Subcommittee—was 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.

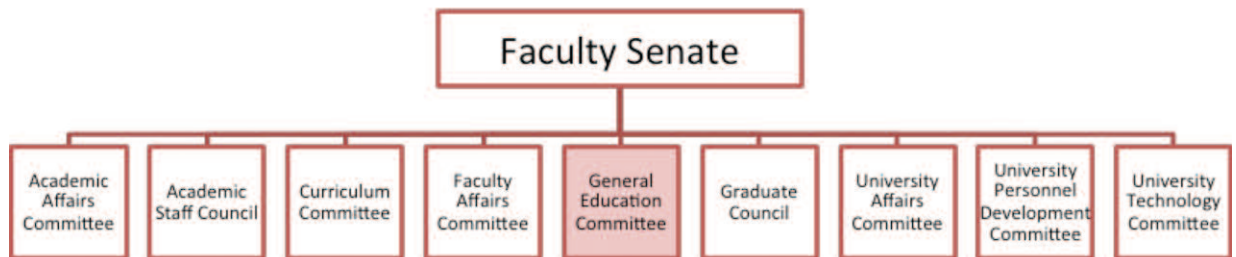


Figure 8

Much as a department manages its own program(s), the new General Education Committee will now 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 will include specific discussion of how courses will be assessed in relation to those outcomes.
- The committee is also 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.
- Finally, the committee is responsible for passing these recommendations on 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.

The creation of the General Education Committee was approved by the Faculty Senate in the spring 2011 semester. Its initial members were elected and the committee began service in fall 2011. (See Appendix H01: GEC Constitution ARTICLE XII.)

Administrative Support

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 the substantial effort required to coordinate these activities, it has long been apparent that additional administrative support is necessary. In 2006, the AASCU site visit team recognized this fact clearly. “[A]chieving a more focused and unified set of GDRs could be immeasurably helped by the creation of a Director of General Education at UW-Stevens Point,” they recommended in their report (Appendix A5: AASCU Team Report 2006, p. 17). As the campus moves toward greater focus in GDR and alignment with a refined University Mission Statement, the Director of GE could serve as a coordinator of the various departmental offerings and the need for assessment. The Director would ideally serve as a link among the various committees evaluating courses for inclusion in the GDR as well as with advisors, academic support personnel, and departments as they make decisions about scheduling and course offerings” (Appendix A5: AASCU Team Report 2006, p. 17). Two years later, the HLC site visit team made a similar recommendation regarding assessment. “The team recommends that the campus consider establishing... a central director or coordinator of assessment processes and feedback so that the students of UWSP will have the benefit of programs of study that have been continuously improved through assessment feedback” (Appendix A3: HLC Report 2008, p. 2).

In response to these recommendations, UW-Stevens Point has moved to put both of these critical positions into place. This fall, we will begin a search for a new half-time Director of General Education to provide administrative oversight of the GEP. Working under the direction of the Associate Vice Chancellor for Teaching, Learning, and Academic Programs, this new position will help to manage seat availability, coordinate faculty development and assessment activities, and serve as a permanent member of the General Education Committee. At the same time, we will also seek to hire a half-time Assessment Coordinator. Located within the Center for Academic Excellence and Student Engagement (CAESE) and serving as a permanent member of both the General Education Committee and the Assessment Subcommittee, the new assessment coordinator will assume responsibility for facilitating assessment of both department-level academic programs and the general education curriculum. This includes coordinating the kinds of collaborations and activities typically used to “close the loop,” or in other words, to utilize the information gathered through assessment directly to improve teaching and learning. This kind of collaborative, evidence-based effort to manage and improve the general education curriculum has been among the most critical missing elements from our current assessment structure. By contrast, under the new program, the Director of General Education and the Assessment Coordinator—working in collaboration with the GEC, the ASC, and CAESE—will cultivate exactly this kind of interaction, solidifying the critical role of assessment in fostering innovative instructional development at UW-Stevens Point.

Office of Policy Analysis and Planning

First-Year Seminar Learning Outcomes

Upon completing this requirement, students will be able to:

- Describe the importance of a liberal education and the ways in which academic study is structured at UWSP.
- Describe the importance of critical thinking and information literacy and apply the associated skills.
- Identify and apply appropriate note-taking, test-taking, and time-management strategies to their academic studies.
- Describe the importance of co-curricular involvement and how it enhances their academic study at UWSP.
- Identify and utilize UWSP programs, resources, and services that will support their academic studies and co-curricular involvement.
- Develop a plan that demonstrates their responsibility for their own education, specifically how it relates to their interests, abilities, career choices, and personal development.

The Office of Policy Analysis and Planning (formerly known as Institutional Research) has a history of involvement with assessment efforts at UW-Stevens Point 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 the assessment of the undergraduate curriculum as well as working with matters of institutional accountability.

Institutional-level assessment will continue to be an essential component of efforts to assess and improve the general education curriculum. As already noted, although the proposed General Education Assessment Plan suggests utilizing course portfolios as the primary means of gathering assessment data from individual courses and instructors, 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. Consequently, to support this continued collaboration a representative from the Office of Policy Analysis and Planning will be included as a permanent member of both the new General Education Committee and the current Assessment Subcommittee.

The First-Year Seminar

In addition to providing the necessary resources and administrative support to implement the GEP, we have also begun to develop key curricular components of the program. Most important, we have begun teaching the new First-Year Seminar (FYS) as a means of piloting both the offering of a curriculum based on clear learning outcomes and the assessment of student learning in that curriculum. On both counts, the FYS has been instrumental in helping faculty and staff to work through many of the difficult issues involved in revising and improving general education.

The FYS is intended to serve as a foundational course in the GEP, introducing students to the concept of a liberal education and the academic skills they will need to succeed: in particular, critical thinking, information literacy, and the willingness to assume responsibility for their own educations. Although the courses are topics-based and vary depending on the expertise of the faculty members teaching them, each FYS shares the same learning outcomes and, thus, the courses will help to familiarize students with general education as much as they will with particular disciplines or majors.

Table 6

UW-Stevens Point has attempted the creation of similar programs in the past, all of which have foundered for lack of resources. In the case of the current FYS, by contrast, the university's administration has committed substantial funding to assist faculty in acquiring the necessary expertise, developing courses, and assessing student learning. Resources are available to support the addition of twelve new FYS instructors each year. Each faculty member accepted into the program receives a course development stipend and attends a workshop offered through the Center for Academic Excellence and Student Engagement (CAESE) to assist them with course development. In addition, the faculty member's home department receives funding to hire instructional academic staff to replace their regular teaching for at least two semesters. This will allow UW-Stevens Point to build the necessary capacity to offer the FYS as a GEP requirement for all students while at the same time help to minimize the impact on academic departments as they transition their own curricular offerings to accommodate the new program. With the help of this funding, UW-Stevens Point offered the first twelve sections of FYS during the spring 2011 semester, and the number has grown to twenty-four in fall 2011.

The creation of the First-Year Seminar has been the responsibility of an ad hoc FYS Planning Committee. The committee first took shape as the campus was debating the inclusion of the course in the GEP. It was composed of volunteers, many of whom had traveled to regional and national conferences in an effort to understand the issues involved in creating a first-year seminar and to bring this knowledge back to UW-Stevens Point to inform the conversation among faculty and staff. In the two years since its inception, the committee has gradually evolved and formalized its structure, assuming primary responsibility for vetting course proposals for the program. Currently, members are developing a charter describing the composition and duties of the committee, as well as its relationship to the governance committees and administrators with responsibility for overseeing general education. (For more information, see Appendix F: First Year Seminar Pilot Program.)

Learning Outcomes and Assessment

In this context, the FYS Planning Committee became the first group on campus to begin working seriously to incorporate the newly approved GEP learning outcomes into a course curriculum, and equally important, to assess student achievement of those outcomes.

As the FYS Planning Committee created a process for soliciting and vetting course proposals for the new FYS program, for example, among the most important criteria members used to evaluate proposals was the instructor's description of how the course would meet the intended learning outcomes. For each outcome, instructors were asked to explain clearly how the course would advance the outcomes and to provide examples of teaching practices, course materials, and assignments to be utilized in teaching the course.

The FYS courses have also provided UW-Stevens Point the opportunity to begin piloting its General Education Assessment Plan, described earlier, years before the program itself could be fully implemented. During the spring 2011 semester, the first twelve faculty members to teach the course agreed to compile course portfolios as they taught, and to share their results with the campus community. These results would be useful not just in evaluating the success of the FYS courses, but equally in helping UWSP faculty and staff to consider how best to assess student learning in the larger General Education curriculum. The GE Assessment Plan is being considered for approval during the fall 2011 semester as part of the GEPRC's Step 6 proposal, and the experiences of the FYS faculty will provide useful formative feedback for deciding how to revise the plan.

The instructors used the worksheet below to guide their assessment efforts:

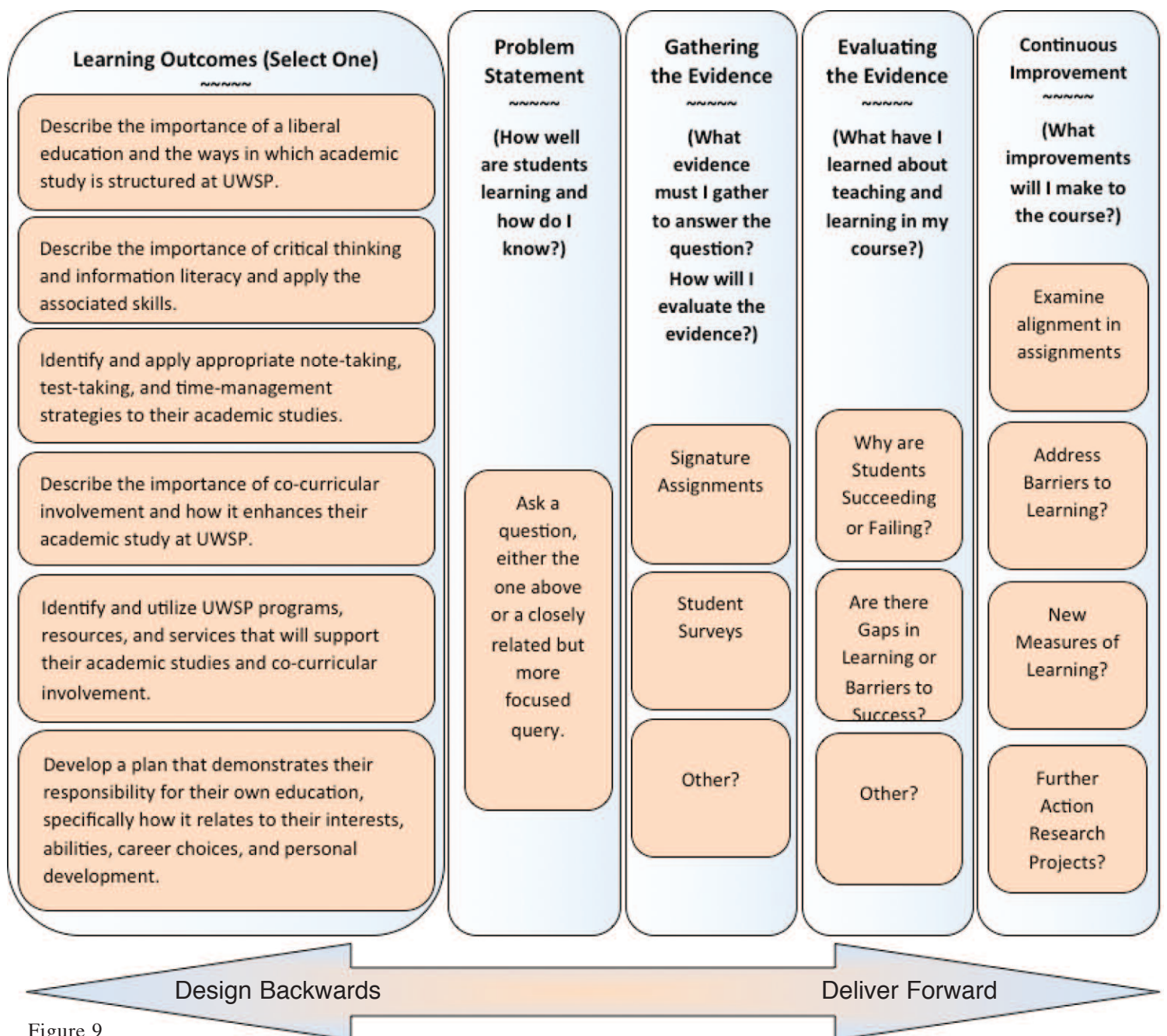


Figure 9

As outlined in Figure 9 above, although each course was designed to meet all the learning outcomes, faculty members teaching the course were asked to assess only one, and to do so by utilizing a problem-based approach in which they explored a question related to the learning outcome. The course instructors met three times during the semester to discuss their efforts and share ideas with one another: once before the classes began, once during the middle of the semester when they consulted with Peggy Maki during her visit to UW-Stevens Point, and finally once more at the end of the semester to summarize their experiences and formulate their collective conclusions.

The exercise proved to be highly instructive, providing strong indications that the GE Assessment Plan proposed by members of the HLCAAT will yield substantial and useful results. First, the FYS instructors learned quickly that writing learning outcomes for a course is significantly easier than designing a course to meet them. In particular, the course instructors concluded that the six outcomes approved by the Faculty Senate for the FYS likely need to be streamlined to make teaching the course more manageable, and to improve student learning. The introduction of critical thinking and information literacy skills proved to be especially challenging, as did the effort to balance helping students achieve the course outcomes with the understandable desire to ensure they also mastered the topical content of the various sections of the course.

Despite these difficulties, students enrolled in this first group of FYS courses generally found their experiences to be highly rewarding. Students reported learning gains in each of the six outcomes of the course. For starters, the course provided a much needed introduction to the basic study skills required to succeed at UW-Stevens Point, as well as the many academic resources available on campus to help students succeed. “FYS gave me strategies to better myself in my schooling such as time management, note taking and study strategy,” reported one student. “FYS taught me a lot about the different resources that can help me reach my goals on campus,” said another. More significant, the course appears to have succeeded in communicating the meaning of a liberal education at UW-Stevens Point. The FYS “helped me see the importance of all the stupid GDR’s I had to take,” quipped one student. It “definitely gave me a more positive outlook on the experiences I had to gain from a liberal arts education.” Perhaps most important, the course appears to have helped many students to assume responsibility for pursuing their educations, and in the words of one student, to “become more intentional and organized when doing so.” (For more information, see Appendix F: First Year Seminar Pilot Program.)

The instructors engaged in teaching the FYS during the fall 2011 semester will continue to pilot the proposed GE Assessment Plan, and their conclusions and recommendations will be reviewed by the new General Education Committee in order to improve the course.

Building the Curriculum

UW-Stevens Point has also taken deliberate steps to implement the General Education Program (GEP) by transitioning faculty, staff, departments, and courses from the current General Degree Requirements (GDRs) into the new curriculum. In particular, we have developed a clear timeline for mapping existing GDR courses into the GEP, aligning those courses with the approved learning outcomes, developing new courses required by the GEP, and revising majors to incorporate the new degree requirements. Combined, these efforts will ensure that UW-Stevens Point is prepared to implement the GEP on schedule in the fall 2013 semester. (See www.uwsp.edu/AcadAff/Pages/generalEducation.aspx for a variety of resources provided to departments to assist with this transition.)

This process will be overseen by the newly established General Education Committee (GEC). As noted earlier, the GEC began meeting for the first time in the fall 2011 semester, its inaugural members having been elected during the previous spring. The committee's first task was to assist departments in moving courses from the existing GDR program into the GEP. To facilitate this effort, the committee provided each department with a checklist of existing GDR courses and asked for feedback regarding which courses faculty intended to move to the GEP, which ones they did not, and which remained uncertain. The GEC then considered these requests, and where appropriate, moved to "grandfather" these courses into the new curriculum. This "grandfathering," however, will not take place without scrutiny of the learning outcomes. During the fall 2012 semester, for example, faculty teaching these courses will be asked to report on the alignment of their learning outcomes and assignments with those approved for the GEP. The end result will be to create a process for building the GEP curriculum that is streamlined but which nevertheless assures the university's ability to assess student achievement of the approved learning outcomes from day one of the new program's implementation.

In transitioning from the GDRs to the GEP, departments were also obligated to incorporate the newly approved degree requirements into their majors. Early in the fall 2011 semester, faculty received guidance on making this transition through a number of workshops and staff retreats. Departments were then given one full semester to consider their options and craft revised major proposals to incorporate the new degree requirements. These proposals will subsequently be considered and approved through the university Curriculum Committee which provides oversight of all department-level programs and curricular changes. This process will ensure that UW-Stevens Point is ready to implement the new degree requirements by the fall 2013 semester, at the same time the new General Education Program goes into effect.

Much the same process and timeline is in place for developing new courses essential to implementing the GEP. This includes the Interdisciplinary Studies, Experiential Learning, Communication in the Major, and Capstone Experience in the Major requirements that will now comprise the Integration Level of the GEP curriculum. Although some departments at UW-Stevens Point have coursework currently in place that will fulfill these new requirements, many programs do not. Faculty members will work between now and the fall 2013 semester to develop these new courses and seek their approval from the General Education Committee.

VI. Strategic Planning

In addition to improving its General Education Program and assessment of student learning, UW-Stevens Point was also urged by the HLC site visit team to continue institutionalizing planning, in keeping with the university's need to improve its utilization of information in decision making. Although the university had done much to improve its planning efforts in recent years, explained the commission's report, "UWSP would be well advised to engage in more comprehensive planning activities including an enrollment management plan and an academic plan that includes an examination of faculty resources as well as support services" (Appendix A3: HLC Report 2008, p. 9).

UWSP has responded to this by developing a new Strategic Plan and incorporating the purposeful implementation of this plan into its routine operations. (For more information, see:

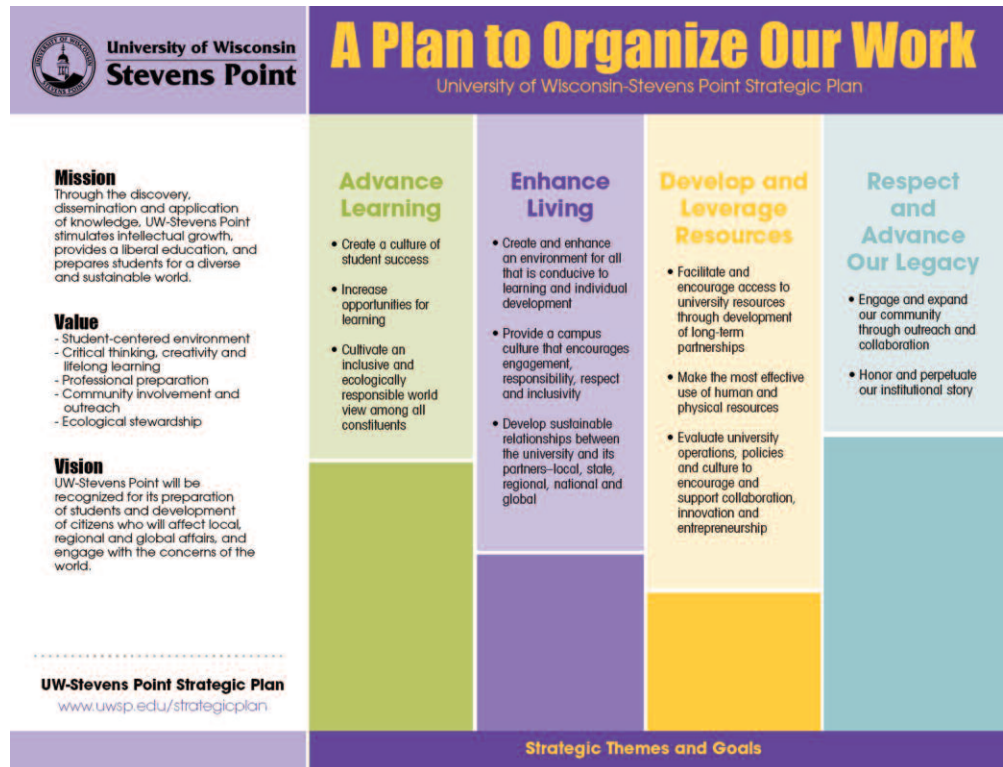
<https://campus.uwsp.edu/sites/projcollab/strategic/SitePages/Home.aspx>.)

Beginning in the fall of 2010, the university created a Strategic Planning Steering Committee (SPSC) with a membership representing the five governance groups of the institution and its four major divisions. The SPSC then proceeded to devise an open, inclusive, and collaborative planning process designed to guide the university's development and provide the foundation on which we could engage in a capital campaign.

Given that the university had already engaged in a variety of self-reflective, information-gathering activities during the previous several years, the planning process itself was able to move

forward quickly and was completed by May 2011. At the heart of its plan, the campus adopted four core themes stemming from UW-Stevens Point's mission statement: to Advance Learning, Enhance Living, Develop and Leverage Resources, and Respect and Advance our Legacy.

For each theme, a task force was then organized to develop the goals, action steps, and tactical initiatives required to fulfill these aspirations. More than two hundred faculty and staff members, students, alumni and community residents participated in these task forces, making clear how widespread and broadly inclusive the planning process



was. (For more information, see:
<https://campus.uwsp.edu/sites/projcollab/strategic/SitePages/Home.aspx>.)

Now, as the strategic planning process moves forward, UW-Stevens Point has begun to create an organizational structure to implement and evaluate the plan, and especially to align the university's resource allocation with the priorities it outlines. In particular, a new and permanent Strategic Planning Committee has been proposed to work alongside the existing Chancellor's Cabinet to assume responsibility for implementing the Strategic Plan. In addition, as part of this effort, several units were moved from Student Affairs to Academic Affairs in order to enhance the university's operations. First, the Student Academic Advising Center, Career Services, and Disability Services were moved into the Teaching-Learning Resources unit, where UW-Stevens Point's Library, Tutoring and Learning Center, and Assistive Technology offices were already housed. The new division will form an Academic Success unit with much greater ability to coordinate the activities and services that support student success. Second, the Admissions, Financial Aid, and Registration and Records offices were moved to Academic Affairs to create a new Enrollment Management unit. Working in collaboration with a new Enrollment Management Committee, this unit will be responsible for helping to manage seat availability in the General Education Program, facilitating the growth and development of department-level academic programs, and building a student profile of UW-Stevens Point's entering class each year.

When taken together and combined with the reforms of assessment and General Education already underway, these efforts have significantly strengthened the institutional planning practices in place at UW-Stevens Point.

Strategic Planning Organizational Structure at UWSP

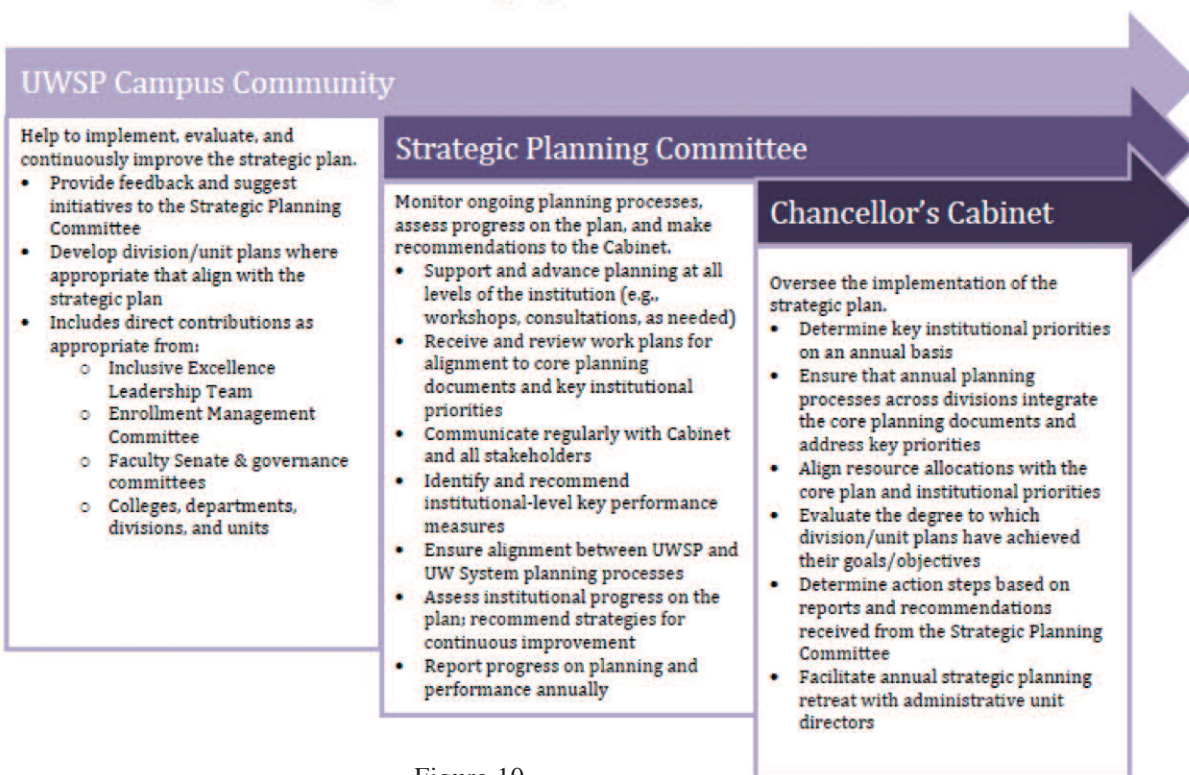


Figure 10

VII. Conclusion: The Work Ahead

Although UW-Stevens Point has made tremendous progress in a relatively short time to strengthen its program assessment and review procedures, create a new General Education Program and degree requirements, and determine a means of assessing student learning within the GEP, a great deal of work remains to be done in order to implement these new practices.

For example, UW-Stevens Point's new procedures for academic program assessment and review were implemented during the fall 2011 semester, and the Assessment Subcommittee and the Department Review Subcommittee have begun to work with the departments now under review. Departments across campus have articulated program learning outcomes, aligned their curricula with these expectations, and drafted assessment plans to evaluate student learning over a five-year cycle. For some departments, the first cycle of assessment activities will necessarily be tentative, involving piloting new assessment techniques and determining how best to utilize the information gathered. Yet collectively, the work we have accomplished in the past several years has placed UW-Stevens Point on a much stronger foundation for academic program assessment than had existed in 2008. Equally important, we have a clear plan for building on this foundation in the years ahead.

In much the same way, UW-Stevens Point is moving steadily toward implementing our new General Education Program and degree requirements. The new General Education Committee began its activities in the fall 2011 semester, assuming responsibility for managing the curriculum. The committee has created a plan for transitioning from the General Degree Requirements to the new program and has begun to work with faculty and departments across campus to move existing courses into the curriculum, create the new components now required—including a the First-Year Seminar—and ensure that each class aligns with the approved learning outcomes. With these plans in place, UW-Stevens Point is on pace to implement the new program by the fall 2013 semester.

Finally, even while faculty and departments have begun to implement the new GEP, the General Education Policy Review Committee is assisting the campus to approve the sixth and final step in the reform process, this one involving the administration and assessment of General Education. The proposal now before the campus includes vitally important decisions regarding how to assess student learning in the GEP. The plan under consideration has been developed through UW-Stevens Point's participation in the HLC's own Academy for the Assessment of Student Learning, and key aspects of the plan have already been successfully piloted by faculty teaching the new First-Year Seminars. Furthermore, no matter what assessment plan is eventually adopted, if the GEP is implemented in the fall 2013 semester as planned, we will complete a full five-year cycle of assessment by

the time of our next regular HLC accreditation review in the 2018-19 academic year. Consequently, the campus will be well positioned to address the concerns that initially prompted the February 2012 focused visit, or in other words to provide evidence of student learning and teaching effectiveness that demonstrates we are fulfilling our educational mission.

Given how far we've come in revising our approach to assessment at UW-Stevens Point, it's clear that the campus has embraced the importance of these efforts and will continue to implement these reforms. To cultivate this kind of grassroots change has taken time, to be sure, and the work is far from complete. Yet just as surely, the time and energy we have invested have been well spent. Faculty, staff, and administrators alike have come to understand that assessment is integral to effective teaching and student success, to program planning and strategic decision making, and to the university's mission. We look forward to reporting on our continued progress in this area in the years to come.

“I believe the university’s approach to revising our assessment efforts was insightful and progressive. We stopped a process that was not providing meaningful results, educated ourselves about better practices, trained those who needed to do the work and allowed the users (the faculty) to create a process that will generate a useful result. Departments are now being allowed to implement the new plan in measured steps to permit refinements to take place as we learn the strengths and weaknesses of our initial work.”

“This bottom-up-driven plan has helped generate faculty buy-in. The sequence of supportive workshops leading to reasonable expectations for progress has been more effective than any campus-wide initiative that I can recall in the last quarter century.”

—UWSP Faculty Member

Cultivating Change:
Reforming Assessment and General Education at the University of Wisconsin-Stevens Point

An Abbreviated Self-Study
Written in Preparation for the Focused Visit of the Higher Learning Commission
February 13-14, 2012



University of Wisconsin
Stevens Point