



**SUNY General Education Assessment Conference**  
**“Campus-Based Assessment of General Education: A Collaborative Dialogue”**

*Conference Summary*

**Presentation to the  
Academic Standards Committee  
of the State University of New York Trustees**

by

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The SUNY General Education Assessment Conference, “Campus-Based Assessment of General Education: A Collaborative Dialogue” took place on June 4-5 in Syracuse. The conference was sponsored by SUNY Cortland, the Health Science Center at Syracuse, the General Education Assessment Review (GEAR) Group, and the Office of the Provost, with the support of the University Faculty Senate and the Faculty Council of Community Colleges.

## **I. Goals and Structure**

The main goals of the conference were:

- to offer a series of presentations intended to provide guidance to campuses regarding how to conceive of and structure effective campus-based plans for assessing the learning outcomes of the SUNY-GER
- to provide a forum for SUNY faculty and professional staff who are responsible for implementing assessment of General Education on their campuses to share information, questions and best practices, and to engage in a productive exchange of ideas and experiences
- to begin to build confidence in the GEAR Group and the review and approval process. (GEAR stands for the General Education Assessment Review Group, a group established upon the recommendation of the Provost's Advisory Task Force on the Assessment of Student Learning Outcomes. GEAR's role is to serve as a resource for campuses as they develop their assessment plans and to receive, review, critique and ultimately approve campus-based plans for the assessment of General Education.)

## **II. Attendance**

138 faculty, administrative leaders, professional staff, and students from virtually every SUNY campus. Guests included:

- Trustee Christopher Holland
- Nancy Willie-Schiff, Office of Higher Education, NY State Education Department
- Oswald Ratteray, Assistant Director for Constituent Services and Special Programs, Middle States Commission on Higher Education

Academic leadership (1 president, 8 AVPs)

Dr. Judson Taylor     President, SUNY Cortland  
Dr. Kenneth Barker    Provost, Health Science Center at Syracuse

(both of whom spoke to participants)

Dr. Keith Cotroneo    Vice President for Academic Affairs, Broome Community College  
Dr. John F. M. Flynn   Vice President and Dean, Academic Affairs, Westchester Community  
                                  College  
Mr. John W. Ganio     Acting Vice President and Dean of the Faculty, Ulster County Community  
                                  College  
Dr. Jon Gonder        Vice President for Academic and Student Affairs, Sullivan County  
                                  Community College  
Dr. David Rule        Interim Vice President for Academic Affairs, Orange County Community  
                                  College  
Dr. James Ware        Vice President of Academic Affairs, Finger Lakes Community College  
Dr. Gary Waller        Vice President, Academic Affairs, Purchase College

and a number of associate chief academic officers

Faculty leadership

Dr. Joseph Flynn        President, University Faculty Senate  
Professor Joseph Hildreth   President-elect, University Faculty Senate  
Dr. Robert Axelrod        President, Faculty Council of Community Colleges  
Dr. Herbert Merrill II     Past-President, Faculty Council of Community Colleges  
  
Dr. Fredrick L. Hildebrand   Co-Chair, University Faculty Senate Undergraduate Committee  
Dr. Marvin LaHood        Co-Chair, University Faculty Senate Undergraduate Committee  
Dr. Robert Carey        University Faculty Senate  
Dr. Stephen Walsh        University Faculty Senate

General Education Assessment Review group (GEAR)

System Administration (Assistant Provosts Joseph DeFilippo and Patricia Pietropaolo)

**III.    Organization**

Organizationally and operationally, the conference went off flawlessly. Thanks are due especially to Patty Francis, to SUNY Cortland's Robert Ploutz-Snyder (Director of Institutional Research) and George Manning (Special Events Coordinator), to the Health Science Center at

Syracuse, especially Vice Provost Paul Grover and his Administrative Assistant Margaret Bourke, and to System Administration and Embassy Suites staff.

The conference was itself structured as an exercise in setting learning objectives and planning and implementing an assessment plan. To that end, the GEAR Group identified a set of learning outcomes for participants so that, at the conclusion of the conference, they were expected to be able to:

- *Construct student learning objectives (outcomes) that can be assessed*
- *Develop strategies for identifying program activities that appropriately address programmatic goals and objectives*
- *Develop strategies for increasing involvement by faculty, students, and staff in the assessment of student learning outcomes*
- *Identify criteria for selection of assessment measures and indices*
- *Identify methodological considerations in administration of assessment measures*
- *Describe ways that assessment results can be used to improve educational programs and the assessment process*
- *Understand how assessment can help foster faculty dialogue and community-building*

The various sessions were designed and sequenced to be themselves the programmatic activities that address the learning objectives of the conference.

#### **IV. Highlights of the conference sessions**

1. *“Establishing Programmatic General Education Goals and Objectives by Faculty for the Improvement of Teaching and Learning.”* (Fernandez, Bello, Prabhakar, Bogin)

By way of background, Nassau CC has a well-developed tradition of using assessment for the improvement of its academic programs and has been recognized by Middle States as a campus with an “exemplary outcomes assessment plan.”

The real strengths of the Nassau presentation were a) its focus on seeking appropriate measures of the extent to which students are achieving defined elements of learning and, b) the emphasis placed on the need to analyze and understand assessment results, make improvements in the learning process, and re-test.

2. *“Strategies for Identifying Program Activities that Address General Education Goals and Objectives.”* (Francis)

This presentation was designed to provide conference participants with a real understanding of how to ensure congruence among objectives, learning activities, and assessment measures and was especially helpful for campuses using infusion strategies for meeting the General Education learning outcomes. (For example, writing skills that are taught in a number of courses, as opposed to, say, in a course on “writing.”) Dr. Francis explained the advantages of using curriculum mapping to discover gaps and redundancies in the relationship between curriculum and intended learning outcomes.

- Panel Discussion: *“Engaging Faculty and Student Participation in the Assessment Process: Issues in Ownership and Motivation.”* (Dearing, Vainder, Fernandez, Grady, Bello)

This free-ranging discussion gave participants an eclectic sense of the issues involved in developing and fostering faculty and student participation in the assessment process.

3. *“The Assessment of Student Learning: Challenges and Opportunities.”* (Young)

The conference's special guest speaker was Dr. Candace Young, Professor of Political Science at Truman State University in Missouri. Dr. Young has served as president of the Truman Faculty Senate and will assume leadership of the state-wide Missouri Faculty Senate in fall 2001. Truman is highly regarded nationally for the quality and effectiveness of its campus-based assessment process, winning the G. Theodore Mitau Award for Innovation and Excellence in 1984, when it was still known as Northeast Missouri State University.

Dr. Young outlined the history of assessment at Truman (it dates from 1972), detailing efforts in the early years when good process and good faith saw them through real uneasiness and apprehension on the part of faculty. She described the multiple components of Truman's current assessment program, including nationally normed exams such as the Collegiate Assessment of Academic Proficiency (or CAAP test), a variety of surveys, and qualitative measures such as interviews and portfolios. She underscored the need for multiple measures to ensure the validity of assessment, and described how Truman assessment involves considerable comparison of the results of these various assessments with student transcripts—this analytical effort being important in order to determine where evaluative discrepancies exist and what can be learned from them.

All of us who have been involved in the development and implementation of the SUNY Assessment Initiative were very gratified to hear Dr. Young begin her presentation by expressing her view that the Report of the SUNY Provost's Advisory Task Force on the Assessment of Student Learning Outcomes was (quote) “quite wonderful.” We had the clear impression that she believes we're on the right track. Certainly, that's quite an accolade from someone who has been very involved with one of the nation's most highly regarded assessment programs.

4. *“Using Assessment Results to Improve General Education and the Assessment Process.”* (Amiran)

Dr. Amiran shared her experiences with SUNY Fredonia's assessment efforts in the 1980s, and led small-group discussions of ways a campus might respond to assessment findings.

5. *“Getting Started on an Assessment Plan: Case Study and Critique.”* (Feldman)

Dr. Mary Jane Feldman, Director of Institutional Research at Niagara County Community College, presented Niagara's preliminary draft assessment plan for General Education as a case study to be critiqued by Dr. Young and Dr. Rosalyn Lindner, Senior Advisor to the Provost for Assessment at Buffalo State. Drs. Young and Lindner felt that Niagara's plan was

a good beginning, but Dr. Young cautioned Dr. Feldman on getting too far out in front of the level of faculty support.

## **V. The GEAR Group and the process**

All GEAR Group members (who were able to) participated in the conference, either as presenters, moderators, or speakers. GEAR group members were well received by conference participants and are regarded, it seems to me, as likely to be good colleagues as the implementation and review process progresses. GEAR Group members are thoughtful and knowledgeable about assessment and sensitive to the fact that SUNY campuses are in many and various stages of implementation readiness, ranging from those with little (or no) experience and/or expertise to campuses with decades of experience and capability and with a significant investment already in place. There was no negative sentiment expressed to (or about) the GEAR Group or the process (that I heard).

## **VI. Assessing the Conference**

At the conclusion of the conference, the GEAR Group distributed an assessment instrument that asked participants to evaluate their capabilities in each of the seven learning outcomes of the conference and to indicate whether their attendance had contributed to their knowledge and abilities. This survey instrument will provide an indication of the value-added by the conference and assist the GEAR Group in addressing assessment skills weaknesses in SUNY. The survey results will be tabulated by the Office of Institutional Research at SUNY Cortland and should be available in about a week or so. (We'll share an aggregated summary with the SUNY assessment community, via the listserv.)

Informal feedback from participants included many positive comments about the value and usefulness of the conference and the professional way in which it was organized. During the course of the conference, several people made generally negative comments, but interestingly, on the post-conference survey, there was significant dissatisfaction expressed by many participants regarding the negative comments made by those (few) people.

## **VII. Final Summary**

Finally, it should be said that the conference was without a doubt a very important and successful part of the initial stage of the implementation of campus-based assessment of the SUNY General Education Requirement. There is clearly a lot of good will “out there,” and many people who are deeply committed to making this work.