



General Education Assessment Review (GEAR) Group

Review Process Guidelines

I. Introduction

The General Education Assessment Review (GEAR) Group has been established upon the recommendation of the Provost's Advisory Task Force on the Assessment of Student Learning Outcomes and has been formed jointly by leadership from the University Faculty Senate, the Faculty Council of Community Colleges, System Administration and the Student Assembly.

Comprised primarily of faculty from throughout the University, GEAR also includes students, campus chief academic officers, and campus professional staff (particularly from Institutional Research). GEAR is co-chaired by Dr. Melanie Vainder, Professor of English and Technical Communications at Farmingdale State, Professor Tina Good, Coordinator of English at Suffolk County Community College, and Dr. Patricia Francis, Assistant Provost for University Assessment and Academic Initiatives. GEAR's web page, which includes a summary of its activities as well as many useful resource and reference materials, may be accessed at <http://cortland.edu/gear/>.

II. Goals

The GEAR Group's goal is to work with campuses as they develop and implement their campus-based plans for assessing student learning outcomes in General Education, following the guidelines contained in the Task Force report as well as subsequent discussions involving faculty, students, and campus and System leadership. GEAR intends to function as a resource and a colleague, making itself available to campuses to the extent that they would welcome and in ways that they feel would be helpful, engaging them in a dialogue as they develop and carry out their assessment plans. In its "process review" of campus General Education assessment plans, GEAR will focus exclusively on the campus's assessment processes and procedures, not the assessment outcomes themselves.

III. Process

Each campus is responsible for determining the particular structure and content of its campus-based General Education assessment plan, following its own existing governance processes.

The task of developing and implementing a campus-based assessment plan for General Education should fall primarily to the faculty members who teach in the program, with the assistance of professional staff and students when appropriate. (Indeed, it may well be the case that on some campuses a full-time staff and/or faculty assessment person may be in a leadership role.) Campus-based assessment plans should be submitted to, and approved by, the campus's Faculty Senate or Faculty Council prior to being submitted to the GEAR Group for formal review.¹

GEAR's Expectations of Campus General Education Assessment Plans

In its initial review of campus assessment plans, the GEAR Group will use nine criteria in evaluating a plan's comprehensiveness and rigor. In addition to reflecting widely recognized best assessment practices in higher education, these criteria are consistent with the general guidelines included in the Task Force Report and subsequent discussions, the expectations for assessment of the Middle States Commission on Higher Education, and regulations proposed by the New York State Education Department as part of its Quality Assurance Initiative in Higher Education.

¹ Though GEAR encourages campuses to engage in dialogue throughout the plan's development process.

In its initial review, the GEAR Group will seek to ascertain for each campus plan that:

1. **The objectives for student learning in General Education relate directly to the student learning outcomes defined in the *Implementation Guidelines of the Provost's Advisory Task Force on General Education*.**² The GEAR Group is likely to agree that this criterion is met if all outcomes from the *Implementation Guidelines* are reflected in the campus' statement of General Education learning objectives for its program. (It is important to note that campuses may also include additional learning objectives that are specific to their own program.)
2. **Programmatic activities intended to accomplish the campus' objectives for student learning in General Education are described.** The GEAR Group is likely to agree that this criterion is met by the campus providing GEAR with its guidelines or procedures for designating courses as General Education courses.
3. **The measures developed to assess student learning are designed to provide credible evidence of the extent to which students have achieved the learning outcomes or skills stated in the objectives.** The GEAR Group is likely to agree that this criterion is met if, for each learning objective, appropriate assessment measures have been established for determining the degree to which students have mastered the objective. In judging the appropriateness of a specific measure, the GEAR Group will rely on answers to the following questions:
 - Will it *directly measure* student learning (i.e., as differentiated from the *perception* that learning has taken place)?
 - Will it measure the objective it is intended to measure (i.e., will it have reasonable *face validity*)?
 - Will the plan provide assurances that the measure is reliable, particularly with respect to the ability of two independent scorers to rate it similarly (i.e., will it have *inter-observer reliability*)? While this issue is less important for objective measures (e.g., multiple choice exams), it is critical for qualitative approaches (e.g., portfolios), which do not yield "one correct answer."
 - Does the plan include externally referenced measures of the campus's choice – either nationally- or SUNY-normed³ – for the learning outcomes in Mathematics, Basic Communication (Written), and Critical Thinking (Reasoning)?
 - Will the data that are reported be representative? It may not be feasible for campuses to assess all students on a particular measure, nor is it necessary. The campus assessment plan should therefore make it clear how representative sampling of students will be assured when collecting assessment data.
 - Does the plan include, for campuses opting to attempt to determine the growth in learning achieved by SUNY undergraduates in some or all of general education ("value-added"), an adequate description of when measures will be administered and how problems commonly related to pre- and post-testing (e.g., student motivation, attrition) will be addressed?
4. **The plan proposes standards to which student performance relative to the learning outcomes in the objectives can be compared.** The GEAR Group is likely to agree that this criterion is met if campus assessment plans include, for each learning objective, the standard defining what level of student performance the faculty considers as "exceeding," "meeting," "approaching," and "not meeting" standards.
5. **The anticipated results of the assessment are able to affirm the degree to which the learning objectives have been achieved and thus make it possible to identify areas that need to be addressed in order to improve learning.** The GEAR Group is likely to agree that this criterion is met if it is clear from the assessment plan that mechanisms exist for sharing assessment results with appropriate faculty and staff and for making programmatic improvements based on the assessment results (if necessary).
6. **Mechanisms for assessing the campus academic environment are described.** The GEAR Group is likely to agree that this criterion is met if it is clear that the assessment plan provides for the periodic administration of a survey that yields indicators reflecting the campus academic environment (e.g. the

² See Appendix D of the *Final Report of the Provost's Advisory Task Force on the Assessment of Student Learning Outcomes*, at http://www.cortland.edu/gear/SUNYassmt_initiative.pdf.

³ See appendix for examples and process.

National Survey of Student Engagement or the Community College Survey of Student Engagement⁴) and consideration of the possible relationships between academic assessment results and these environmental factors.

7. **The assessment plan has been reviewed and approved through the appropriate curriculum and faculty governance structures.** The GEAR Group is likely to agree that this criterion is met if the assessment plan includes a section describing the process through which the plan was developed and approved on the campus prior to being shared with the GEAR Group.
8. **The plan adheres to the timetable established by the GEAR Group and agreed to by the University Provost.** The GEAR Group is likely to agree that this criterion is met if it is clear that the assessment of all of the General Education learning objectives in the Knowledge and Skills Areas and Competencies takes place within a three-year cycle. (The campus plan should include the schedule for the assessment cycle.)
9. **The assessment process includes provisions for evaluating the assessment process itself and disseminating assessment results to the appropriate campus community.** The GEAR Group is likely to agree that this criterion is met if processes are described in the assessment plan for evaluating the assessment process once complete, making changes in the process if necessary, and sharing assessment results with the appropriate campus community.

Initial Review

GEAR will receive and critique campus assessment plans and approve those that meet its expectations for effective assessment; campuses will be advised in writing of revisions that would likely lead to approval, as appropriate. GEAR will place a strong emphasis on the extent to which campuses demonstrate they will use assessment results to improve their General Education programs.

Ongoing Review

After the initial review process, the GEAR Group will review campus General Education assessment plans on a biennial, staggered basis, applying the same criteria as above, with greater emphasis on how campuses are using assessment data to improve their General Education programs.

IV. Reporting

GEAR will establish a clear protocol and a standardized reporting format—consistent with the recommendations of the Provost's Advisory Task Force on the Assessment of Student Learning Outcomes—for campuses to use to report assessment results in General Education to System Administration for the purpose of accountability. This annual report, to be submitted by the Chief Academic Officer at each campus directly to the Office of the Provost, will include specific information on its students' progress in mastering the learning outcomes outlined in the *General Education Implementation Guidelines*.⁵ System Administration will use these data—in accord with the Utilization and Reporting of Assessment Results principles in the Task Force report—in the preparation of summary reports to external stakeholders for accountability purposes.

V. Summary

The GEAR Group will continue the long tradition of involving existing faculty governance and curriculum review structures on individual State University campuses in the process of assessment. This involvement of SUNY faculty was central in the early 1990's when the State University was playing a leadership role nationally in the assessment movement, and it has certainly characterized the deliberations of the Task Force on the Assessment of Student Learning Outcomes that provided the *raison-d'être* for GEAR.

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Updated to reflect revised University policy, October 12, 2004

Updated to reflect progress in the implementation of Strengthened Campus-Based Assessment, January 12, 2006

⁴ Or, perhaps, a revised and expanded SUNY Student Opinion Survey.

⁵ Reported results should indicate the percentage of students exceeding, meeting, approaching, and not meeting the delineated learning outcomes.

Appendix

SUNY-normed Measures

Campuses wishing to include SUNY-normed measures in lieu of nationally-normed measures in Mathematics, Basic Communication (Written), and Critical Thinking (Reasoning) may use one of two approaches:

1. A locally developed instrument that measures the learning outcomes in one or more of these three areas and that is demonstrated to correlate statistically (i.e., have *concurrent validity*) with nationally-normed measures, including those listed below.
2. Rubrics and standards that measure student performance in one or more of these three areas and are reviewed and approved by the GEAR Group. In taking this approach, campuses may choose to use the scoring standards and rubrics developed in 2005 by the three discipline-based panels of SUNY faculty; these standards and rubrics may be accessed as indicated below:

Writing Rubrics and Standards - <http://www.cortland.edu/gear/WritingRubrics.Final.pdf>
Critical Thinking Rubrics and Standards - <http://www.cortland.edu/gear/CTRubric.final.pdf>
Mathematics Rubrics and Standards - <http://www.cortland.edu/gear/mathrubric.pdf>

Campuses may also choose to use their own scoring rubrics and standards upon demonstrating to GEAR that their standards and rubrics correspond to those developed by the discipline-based panel. Campuses opting to use their own rubrics and standards would also be expected to periodically provide GEAR with samples of student work for each standard of student performance, to be reviewed to ensure ongoing validity and reliability of the measure. GEAR will provide campuses with feedback and, possibly, recommendations regarding any scoring adjustments that may be required.

Nationally-normed Measures

While there are many nationally-normed measures available that are designed to assess learning outcomes in Mathematics, Basic Communications (Written), and Critical Thinking (Reasoning), existing measures do not typically meet a number of important criteria that would yield optimal information on the SUNY student learning outcomes for Critical Thinking (Reasoning), Mathematics, and Basic Communication (Written). For instance, existing tests do not typically map specifically to the different learning outcomes included in each area, nor do they yield separate sub-scores for each learning outcome statement.

At present, ACT has provided suitable measures for the assessment of Critical Thinking (Reasoning) and Basic Communication (Written), and more information regarding these measures may be accessed at <http://www.act.org/caap/suny/>. In contrast, an appropriate nationally-normed test is not yet available for assessing Mathematics. System Administration continues to work with testing companies on the development of such a test, and will inform campuses as soon as such an option is available.

Costs

The costs associated with the requirements and implementation of strengthened campus-based assessment will be paid for by System Administration, with appropriate limitations established for sample size.

Mixing and Matching

It is also possible to combine these approaches: for example, a campus may choose to use ACT test for Critical Thinking and SUNY-normed measures for Mathematics and Basic Communication (Written).