



## **General Education Assessment Review (GEAR) Group**

Meeting: September 29, 2004, System Administration (Albany)

Present: Judith Adams-Volpe, Robert Axelrod, Susan Bello, Frances Dearing, Mary Jane Feldman, Joseph Flynn, Patricia Francis (co-chair), Kellie Gervais, Milton Johnson, Robert Jubenville, Jack Meacham, Patricia Pietropaolo, Kimberley Reiser, David Rule, Peter Sinden, Melanie Vainder

Participating by Teleconference: Pat Belanoff, David Carson, Tina Good, Joseph Hildreth, Runi Mukherji

Regrets: Robert Golden

Guests: Stephanie Gross                      Member, SUNY Board of Trustees; President, State University Student Assembly

Tammie Maginnis                      FIPSE Coordinator, Holyoke Community College

Sue Mackler                              Professor, Computer Information Science, Holyoke Community College

### **I. Welcome**

Patricia Francis welcomed Dr. Anne Huot, Associate Provost and Head of Academic Affairs at System Administration. Dr. Huot thanked the GEAR Group members for their continued service, and stressed the importance of the work they would be doing this year in the implementation of strengthened campus-based assessment. Dr. Huot also provided information about her own academic background, saying that she spent most of her career at the University of Vermont, first as a faculty member then as dean of graduate studies.

GEAR members asked several questions at that point, most of which involved resources and funding. Dr. Huot affirmed that System Administration is strongly supportive of the SUNY Assessment Initiative and that it will live up to the commitments that have been made with respect to implementing strengthened campus-based assessment. She did ask the group to keep the issue of cost in mind as it does its work, so that there is ongoing awareness of and conversation about the amount of money needed to bring about this implementation. Other questions involved the Student Opinion Survey (SOS), and whether or not the Board of Trustees' June 2004 Resolution calling for campuses to measure "student engagement" might result in the modification or discontinuation of the SOS. Dr. Huot responded that this issue has already been taken up by Academic Affairs, specifically by Associate Provost John Porter in Institutional Research and Analysis, and that he will make recommendations in this regard after doing research and conferring with campuses. Finally, there was discussion of the extent to which GEAR will keep the Trustees' Academic Standards Committee apprised of its work. Dr. Huot pointed out that this committee, which is currently establishing its agenda for the year, will likely be very interested in GEAR's progress and that regular updates will be provided, by both herself and Trustee Stephanie Gross, who is a member of Academic Standards.

Dr. Huot then excused herself to attend a campus meeting in Syracuse, again thanking members for their service.

### **II. Committee Introductions/Update on Campus-Based General Education Assessment Process**

Francis began by acknowledging the fact that GEAR had not met since the highly successful "Best Practices" conference in November 2003, in large part because, as discussions centering on "strengthened campus-based assessment" unfolded during 2003-04, it was clear that GEAR would play a role but specific expectations regarding that role were undefined. She then acknowledged the following new GEAR members: Student member Kellie Gervais, the University at Albany; Robert Golden, SUNY Plattsburgh; Tina Good, Suffolk Community College; Milton Johnson, Finger Lakes Community College; and Patricia Pietropaolo, System Administration. She also welcomed Board of Trustee Member Gross as well as two visitors from Holyoke

Community College in Massachusetts, Tammie Maginnis and Susan Mackler. Holyoke is currently in the process of implementing comprehensive learning outcomes assessment, and had contacted Francis for the purpose of learning more about SUNY's approach to assessing general education.

Francis then provided the following updates on campus-based general education assessment, now beginning the third and final year of the first three-year cycle:

- 52/57 campuses have approved plans in place and are providing annual reports as required.
- Her review of the reports for 2003-04 indicates that the process is working well, with some campuses doing a stellar job, many using highly innovative assessment approaches, and all taking the task quite seriously. Not surprisingly, there is room for improvement in the campus-based approach, and the transition to strengthened campus-based assessment will provide a good opportunity for positive changes to take place.
- She, Frances Dearing, and Melanie Vainder made a presentation on the first year of campus-based general education assessment at the AAHE Assessment Conference in June 2004; this session was very well attended and received.
- She, Kimberley Reiser, Joe Hildreth, and Board of Trustees Member Celine Paquette have submitted a proposal for presentation at the March 2005 AAHE National Conference, describing the process of developing and approving strengthened campus-based assessment.
- The GEAR Group's existing review teams will have to be reconfigured due to individuals' leaving the committee; she will take care of this in the near future, trying to make sure that review teams include a mixture of experienced and less experienced members and making as few changes as possible in group leaders.
- As has taken place in the past, in the next month or two she will hold an orientation/training session for new members, focusing on the review of campus assessment plans in order to better assure uniformity in evaluating these plans.
- The GEAR Website remains at [www.cortland.edu/gear](http://www.cortland.edu/gear), and she continues to maintain it, but she hopes to relocate the site to the System/SUNY Provost site, likely over the winter break.

### **III. "Strengthened Campus-Based Assessment" and the June 2004 Board of Trustees Resolution**

Francis provided a brief explanation of activities that took place during the 2003-04 academic year in response to the June 2003 Board of Trustees' resolution that would have required university-wide, value-added assessment using "common measures" for general education programs across the State University. After the University Faculty Senate (UFS) and Faculty Council of Community Colleges (FCCC) passed resolutions opposing the BOT resolution during 2003-04, it became clear that an alternative proposal was necessary that would satisfy the Board of Trustees, faculty governance, and System Administration from a "best assessment practices" perspective. Former Associate Provost Donald Steven formed a task group, with input from Reiser and Hildreth, for the purpose of developing such an alternative; this group became known as the "Strengthened Campus-Based Assessment Discussion Group."

During this group's deliberations, three areas of consensus emerged: 1) The desire to have one general education assessment process (i.e., as opposed to the two proposed in the original Assessment Task Force report, one "campus-based" and the other "university-wide"); 2) An expanded role for the GEAR Group in overseeing this new process, based on agreement that GEAR was doing a good job providing collegial peer review of campus assessment plans; and, 3) The need to find alternatives to the proposal in the 2003 BOT resolution that standardized tests be used to assess general education across SUNY. Although deliberations were difficult at times, Francis reported that the discussion group managed to develop a proposal that was endorsed in resolutions by the UFS, the FCCC, and the SUNY Board of Trustees, as demonstrated in the June 2004 BOT resolution, which passed with only one dissenting vote.

Hildreth then provided the GEAR Group with additional information on the UFS deliberations, saying that early in the task group discussions he had provided a list of concerns that would have to be addressed before endorsement – in addition to those already described, he specifically mentioned limiting the number of learning outcomes to be assessed, not requiring value-added assessment, and safeguards on external reporting of assessment data. Reiser then distributed a copy of the FCCC resolution as well as an informative chronology of the evolution from "university-wide" to "strengthened campus-based" assessment. According to Reiser, key to the FCCC's endorsement was the assurance by SUNY System Administration that costs resulting from strengthened campus-based assessment would be covered by System, as well as a mechanism for ensuring that rubrics and

standards developed by discipline-based panels could be reviewed and approved by SUNY faculty. Trustee Gross then shared her perspective of having served on the discussion group as a student, and emphasized that the success of strengthened campus-based assessment will require extensive involvement by students in its implementation.

Francis then took the opportunity to recognize the pivotal roles played by Hildreth, Reiser, and Trustee Gross in last year's effort, and thanked them for their hard work.

#### **IV. Incorporating the June 2004 BOT Resolution Into the GEAR Process**

Francis explained to members that, during the deliberations of the Strengthened Campus-Based Assessment Discussion Group, she and Donald Steven were asked by the group to determine whether it would be possible to incorporate the major ideas emerging out of the group's discussion into the existing GEAR Group Review Process Guidelines, thereby creating one assessment process to be overseen by GEAR. She and Steven did so, and these revisions were subsequently endorsed by the discussion group, the UFS, and the FCCC. Francis explained further that she had sent a draft of these revised guidelines to the GEAR Group for its consideration, but she emphasized that they were only intended as a starting point for GEAR's discussions and that any final draft would require GEAR's input and approval.

The group then went through the revised guidelines, focusing on needed substantive changes with the understanding that minor wording changes could be incorporated later, since the draft approved by GEAR will need to go to campuses for review and input as well as approval by Provost Salins. After the group finished its review, Francis agreed to have a revised version out early the week of October 4, and members agreed to have their feedback on the revised guidelines to Francis in 48 hours after receiving them.

#### **V. Comments from Provost Salins**

Provost Salins joined the GEAR Group for lunch, expressing great appreciation for the work members were doing and noting that two of the three processes included in the SUNY Assessment Initiative – assessment of the major and campus-based general education assessment – were going very well. While the third component of the initiative – now referred to as “strengthened campus-based assessment” – might be the most difficult to implement in some ways, the resolutions passed during 2003-04 by the UFS, the FCCC, and the Board of Trustees in support of this approach greatly help ensure the success of this effort. As the provost pointed out, it is now up to the GEAR Group to provide details for how campuses can go about implementing strengthened campus-based assessment.

The provost then addressed some specific components of strengthened campus-based assessment, saying that campuses should be encouraged to utilize a value-added approach wherever feasible and that it would be ideal for campuses to use the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) or the Community College Survey of Student Engagement (CCSSE) in evaluating student engagement, due to the demonstrated effectiveness of these surveys and because more utilization of a common instrument will help keep expenses down. Provost Salins also told the group that he was proud of the SUNY Assessment Initiative, and that he believed criticism of the initiative was unfounded, pointing to a recent letter in the *Chronicle of Higher Education* written by Board of Trustee Chairman Egan and Chancellor King in defense of SUNY's approach to assessment.

In response to questions by GEAR Group members, Provost Salins said that the cost of strengthened campus-based assessment should not be the determining factor in deciding how to implement it, though of course resources are always of concern. For campuses wishing to administer standardized tests in meeting the conditions of strengthened campus-based assessment earlier than Fall 2006, Provost Salins said he would support System funding for these efforts as long as they were part of a campus assessment plan submitted to and approved by the GEAR Group. In response to a question from Reiser, Provost Salins said that System Administration would also cover campus costs associated with the development of local instruments, commensurate to funding provided for the use of nationally-normed measures. He did add that campuses would not receive financial support for work that would normally be carried out by faculty and staff members.

#### **VI. GEAR Membership/Leadership Issues**

Francis began this discussion by pointing out that there have never been formal membership procedures for GEAR, and that appointment to the group generally resulted in the past when Donald Steven asked individuals to

serve, after consulting with her, Hildreth, and Reiser. Given the expanded responsibilities for and higher visibility of GEAR, it makes sense to have a more regularized procedure for making appointments, defining terms, and appointing replacements when members step off or go on sabbatical. In June, right before Donald Steven left, there was a meeting attended by Steven, Huot, Francis, Pietropaolo, Hildreth, and Reiser, and a proposed draft for membership was developed. Francis anticipates that the proposed scheme will be finalized during the next few months and approved by Provost Salins.

Similarly, GEAR has always been co-chaired by a System Administration representative (Steven) and a campus representative (Francis), but at the present time Francis, now a System Administration representative, is the only chair. At the June meeting described above, participants also drafted a proposal for appointing co-chairs. As with the membership proposal, Francis expects this issue to be resolved in the near future.

## **VII. Next Steps**

During the GEAR Group's review of the revised review process guidelines, several members pointed out that much detail remained to be added in order for the guidelines to be useful to campuses, especially with respect to the choice of externally-referenced measures for critical thinking, mathematics, and writing. The group therefore decided to form three sub-groups, each of which would provide, before the next GEAR Group meeting, a comprehensive analysis of one of the three options for using externally-referenced measures. The three sub-groups are as follows, with the group leader listed first:

**Nationally-Normed Measures Work Group:** Melanie Vainder, Frances Dearing, Susan Bello, Judy Adams-Volpe, Peter Sinden, Bob Axelrod (to include information on the NSSE/CCSSE)

**Locally-Developed Instrument (Concurrent Validity) Work Group:** David Rule, Jack Meacham, Joe Flynn, Patty Francis

**Locally-Developed Instrument (Discipline-Based Panel) Work Group:** Tina Good, David Carson, Kellie Gervais, Joe Hildreth, Pat Belanoff, Mary Jane Feldman

The ultimate objective of the groups' work will be to thoroughly explore what will be involved in implementing each of the options. GEAR will then provide this information to campuses to help them as they begin their own deliberations about implementing strengthened campus-based assessment.

More specifically, the charge for the task groups was defined as follows:

1. Do all necessary research, as appropriate.
2. Identify all issues that will need to be considered by GEAR and campuses if they choose to utilize that particular approach.
3. Lay out all actions that would have to be taken in order to implement the approach (by both System Administration and campuses), including recommendations for a time line.
4. Describe advantages and disadvantages of the particular approach.
5. As appropriate, lay out how GEAR would evaluate a campus's proposal to use the approach, using a format similar to our current guidelines, especially Criterion #3 (i.e., "The GEAR Group is likely to agree this criterion is met if .....").
6. Make suggestions as to how System Administration and GEAR might support campuses that elect to use the approach.

## **VIII. Next Meeting**

The next GEAR meeting will be held in approximately 4-5 weeks, in Syracuse. Francis will provide details on the meeting as soon as possible.

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This meeting summary will be posted on GEAR's Web page: (<http://cortland.edu/gear/>) and sent to campus Chief Academic Officers and subscribers to the assessment listserv (ASSESS-L@ls.sysadm.suny.edu).