



SUNY’s General Education Assessment Review Group –

“Tips” for Completing Plans for Strengthened Campus-Based Assessment (SCBA)

Preface/Background Information

Formed in January 2001, the General Education Assessment Review Group (GEAR) is charged to provide “initial and ongoing review” for SUNY campuses’ general education (GE) assessment plans. Beginning with the 2001-02 academic year, GEAR started its review of campuses’ original GE assessment plans, as part of the process referred to as “campus-based assessment.” All 57 SUNY campuses with GE programs now have GEAR-approved campus-based assessment plans in place, and many have completed one full cycle of GE assessment (i.e., they have collected assessment data on all 12 student learning outcome areas included in the SUNY GE Requirement).

In June 2004, the SUNY Board of Trustees passed a resolution requiring changes in SUNY-wide GE assessment, resulting in a process that is referred to as “strengthened campus-based assessment,” or SCBA. Under this process, campuses are expected to use externally-referenced measures of their choice to assess three learning outcome areas: Mathematics, Critical Thinking [Reasoning], and Basic Communication [Written]. Institutions are also expected to assess students’ perceptions of the campus’ academic environment, more specifically, students’ engagement in academic activities.

During the Fall 2004 semester, GEAR revised its existing guidelines for campus-based GE assessment to incorporate the provisions in the Board of Trustees’ June 2004 resolution on SCBA. University Provost Peter D. Salins approved these revised guidelines in February 2005 and sent them to campuses, asking them to change their existing GE assessment plans according to these new guidelines and submit their SCBA assessment plans to his office. These plans are due to Provost Salins’ office by February 15, 2006.

GEAR is aware that campuses have many questions about SCBA, and in particular how SCBA “relates” to the original, campus-based assessment process. One purpose of this document, then, is to clarify this relationship. In addition, although this document includes no new information, it does provide a compilation of many materials from different sources (e.g., the GEAR Web site, Provost Salins’ communications to campuses) – in the form of “FAQ’s” – intended to be useful to campuses in finalizing their SCBA plan. Further questions should be directed to Assistant Provost Patricia Francis, at Patricia.Francis@suny.edu or (518) 443-5644.

Frequently-Asked Questions About SCBA

1. What is the relationship between the processes of “campus-based assessment” of GE and “strengthened campus-based assessment”?

The campus-based assessment process refers to the existing plans campuses have in place – as approved by GEAR – for conducting the assessment of the 12 student learning outcomes areas (i.e., the 10 Knowledge and Skill Areas combined with the 2 Infused Competencies) that make up the SUNY General Education Requirement (GER).

SCBA refers to the modifications required in institutions’ campus-based assessment plans as a result of the SUNY Board of Trustees’ 2004 resolution. These modifications are reflected in the revised GEAR guidelines, accessible at: http://www.cortland.edu/gear/2-9_05%20GEAR%20Guidelines.pdf.

At present, “campus-based assessment” and SCBA are necessarily separate because campus plans for SCBA have not yet been approved by GEAR. Eventually, however, campuses will be able to fold “campus-based assessment” and SCBA into one, unified, GE assessment plan. To be specific, once a campus’ SCBA plan has been approved by GEAR, it should be able to subsume the elements of that plan into its existing, campus-based plan.

The questions below contain more specific information campuses may find useful in preparing their final SCBA plans for submission to the Provost’s office.

2. Once a campus’ plan for SCBA is approved, how will it differ from its original plan for campus-based assessment?

In only two ways. First, under SCBA, a campus must use externally-referenced measures of its choice to assess three learning outcome areas: Mathematics, Critical Thinking [Reasoning], and Basic Communication [Written]. Second, institutions are expected to assess students’ perceptions of the campus’ academic environment – more specifically, students’ engagement in academic activities at the institution. More detail about each of these points is provided in the questions below.

3. Once a campus’ plan for SCBA is approved, does it have to assess Mathematics, Critical Thinking [Reasoning], and Basic Communication [Written] using two different methodologies (i.e., using measures as described in its original plan as well as the externally-referenced measures as described in its SCBA plan)?

No. The externally-referenced measures as described and approved in the campus’ SCBA plan for the three learning outcomes areas of interest replace the measures and methodologies approved in the campus’ original plan for these three areas.

4. Does the campus’ schedule for assessing Mathematics, Critical Thinking [Reasoning], and Basic Communication [Written] under SCBA have to correspond to the schedule the campus included in its original campus-based assessment plan? For example, if a campus under its original plan were scheduled to next assess Mathematics in 2006-07, does it have to follow that schedule for SCBA?

No, as long as its plan demonstrates that Mathematics, Critical Thinking [Reasoning], and Basic Communication [Written] will be assessed at some point during the first cycle of SCBA [i.e., from

2006-07 through 2008-09). The campus' SCBA plan should state when it first intends to assess these three student learning outcomes areas using externally-referenced measures.

5. How does the assessment of Mathematics, Critical Thinking [Reasoning], and Basic Communication [Written] under SCBA affect the campus' assessment of the other student learning outcomes areas?

It need not affect the assessment of the other student learning outcomes at all. Campuses are free to continue using their GEAR-approved assessment approaches to these areas. Of course, if a campus opts to change its original schedule for SCBA (e.g., defer the SCBA of Mathematics from 2007-08 until 2008-09), it may have to alter its schedule for another student learning outcomes area in order to make sure that, overall, it is able to assess all 12 student learning outcomes areas in a 3-year period.

6. Our campus began administering GE assessments under our GEAR-approved plan in 2002-03, and completed one full three-year cycle of GE assessment in 2004-05. Since SCBA doesn't become effective until Fall 2006, is our campus obligated to conduct GE assessment during the 2005-06 academic year?

Yes. As was emphasized at the April 2005 GEAR conference held in Syracuse, during the 2005-06 academic year campuses should carry out GE assessment following their original plans. For instance, if a campus assessed American History, Foreign Language, Information Management, and Social Sciences during 2002-03 (and has requested no changes in its assessment schedule), then the campus should assess those same areas during 2005-06. Further, as is true every year campuses are expected to submit their GE assessment results from 2005-06 to System Administration by June 1, 2006.

7. Our campus was under the impression that, following the 2004-05 academic year (i.e., the third complete year of the first GE assessment cycle), GEAR would ask us to submit updated GE assessment plans for the second cycle reflecting changes we intended to make on the basis of what we learned during the first cycle. Will GEAR be calling for updated plans for the second cycle?

Not at this time. Once all campus SCBA plans are approved, GEAR will call for updated plans, likely during 2006-07. In the meantime, as stated in Question #6, campuses should carry out GE assessment following their original plans. Campuses that wish to make significant changes in their original plans should consult with Assistant Provost Patricia Francis, at Patricia.Francis@suny.edu or (518) 443-5644.

8. What is the most important piece of advice you can give campuses as they prepare the final draft of their assessment plan for SCBA?

Follow the GEAR Guidelines, particularly with respect to the nine criteria outlined for campuses in those guidelines. *It is extremely important that campuses address each of these criteria thoroughly – including the bulleted sub-components for Criterion #3 – since the GEAR Group will primarily be using these in their evaluations of the campuses' SCBA plans.* Campuses may also gain insight into the preparation process by referring to their original GEAR-approved general education assessment plan.

9. What format should campuses use in submitting their GE assessment plans for SCBA?

Although there is no standardized format, campuses may find it easiest to prepare their plans following sequentially the nine criteria outlined in the GEAR Group guidelines for SCBA. Whatever

format a campus uses, it should be clear where – and how – the campus intends to address the nine criteria from the GEAR Guidelines.

10. What if, for a particular criterion for the SCBA plan, nothing has changed since the campus had its original GE assessment plan approved by GEAR?

While this should not be the case for many of the criteria, it may be true for some, notably criteria #1, #2, #5, #8, and #9. As an example, Criterion #2 states, “Programmatic activities intended to accomplish the campus’ objectives for student learning in General Education are described,” followed by “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.” If the campus’ process for designating courses as General Education courses has not changed since its original plan was approved, the campus can simply state this in its SCBA plan for this criterion. If the process has changed, however, the campus needs to describe those changes to GEAR.

11. Our institution, in implementing campus-based general education assessment, has exclusively utilized a course-embedded strategy, meaning that all assessments have been administered in the context of a course, counting toward student grades. Will this be a problem as we transition to SCBA?

No and, in fact, GEAR continues to encourage campuses to use course-embedded assessment as much as possible since it is the least time- and labor-intensive, ensures student motivation and, most important, is most likely to lead to improvements in teaching and learning. Even campuses that are considering using nationally-normed tests can use a course-embedded strategy, since the SUNY-approved measures map directly to the SUNY learning outcomes, yield separate sub-scores for each learning outcome, and can be administered within a class session.

12. Does the campus’ SCBA plan have to address all 12 SUNY General Education student learning outcome areas?

No. SCBA pertains only to Critical Thinking, Mathematics, and Basic Communication [Written]. As such, the SCBA plan need only address these three student learning outcome areas.

13. What are the exact student learning outcomes that make up SCBA?

Critical Thinking. There have been no changes in the student learning outcome statements for Critical Thinking compared to when campuses’ original plans were submitted and approved. These outcome statements are as follows:

Students will:

- Identify, analyze, and evaluate arguments as they occur in their own or other’s work; and
- Develop well-reasoned arguments.

Mathematics. For Mathematics, there have been changes, with the original outcomes replaced by the new learning outcomes developed by SUNY’s Advisory Committee on General Education (ACGE) and approved by Provost Salins in Spring 2005. These outcome statements are as follows:

Students will demonstrate the ability to:

- Interpret and draw inferences from mathematical models such as formulas, graphs, tables and schematics;
- Represent mathematical information symbolically, visually, numerically and verbally;
- Employ quantitative methods such as, arithmetic, algebra, geometry, or statistics to solve problems;
- Estimate and check mathematical results for reasonableness; and,
- Recognize the limits of mathematical and statistical methods.

Basic Communication [Written]. For Basic Communication [Written], there has been one change. Specifically, the third learning outcome statement (i.e., “Research a topic, develop an argument, and organize supporting details”) will not be part of SCBA, for reasons outlined in Provost Salins’ October 5 communication to campuses (see <http://www.cortland.edu/gear/SCBASalins2.pdf>). This third learning outcome statement will remain part of campus-based general education assessment, and Provost Salins has asked the GEAR Group to make recommendations as to how campuses might best address the assessment of this student learning outcome.

The outcome statements for Basic Communication [Written] for SCBA are as follows:

Students will:

- Produce coherent texts within common college-level written forms;
- Demonstrate the ability to revise and improve such texts;

14. How much detail is required for Criterion #3 in the campus’ SCBA plan (i.e., “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.”)?

A campus’ response to Criterion #3 may be relatively brief if it intends to use the nationally-normed options and/or the discipline-based panels’ rubrics for assessing the three learning outcomes areas of interest. In those instances, the campus would state the approach they intend to take (e.g., “In assessing Mathematics, the campus will use the scoring rubrics and standards developed by the SUNY-wide discipline panel,” or “In assessing Critical Thinking, the campus will use the ACT Critical Thinking test”). (But note that the campus needs to address all bulleted items under Criterion #3, as described in more detail below.)

The campus will need to provide more information, of course, if it decides to: a) use its own scoring rubrics and standards; b) correlate its own local measure to a nationally-normed test; or, c) use a nationally-normed test other than those that have been approved by SUNY. Specifically, the campus should provide the following additional information as appropriate to the situation:

- Using local rubrics and standards** – The campus should include its own rubrics and standards and also address how its rubrics and standards correspond to those developed by the SUNY discipline panel.
- Correlating local measures to nationally-normed tests** – The campus must describe to GEAR how it intends to demonstrate statistical correlations between its local measure and those nationally-normed tests approved by SUNY, complete with a time frame for establishing such relationships prior to the actual administration of the learning outcomes assessment.

- c. **Using nationally-normed tests other than those approved by SUNY** – The campus must justify to GEAR the utilization of such alternative measures, particularly with respect to the ability of these measures to reflect the individual student learning outcome statements for the area of interest and to yield separate sub-scores for each of the statements.

Finally, GEAR does not require that campuses include actual tests or assignments in their assessment plans. However, as suggested above in Question #1, campuses need to make sure they address all the questions included under Criterion #3 in the GEAR Guidelines (e.g., direct measure, face validity), as appropriate to the assessment approaches they have chosen in implementing SCBA. For instance, campuses that opt to use rubrics need to address satisfactorily the issue of inter-observer reliability in the scoring of the rubrics. For example, what training will take place prior to the administration of the assessment to ensure that independent raters are reaching the same conclusions about student performance? Similarly, once inter-observer reliability is established, what procedures will the campus put in place to assure that, over time, reliability standards are maintained? And, if there are discrepancies between two scorers' ratings, how will the campus reconcile these discrepancies?

15. In its attempts to establish and maintain inter-observer reliability, does a campus need to have every student artifact (e.g., essay, paper, portfolio) assessed independently by two persons?

While such an approach would be ideal, it simply isn't practical, and GEAR does not expect it. What is important is that there is clearly a process in place (i.e., training, norming sessions) to ensure that raters are initially using the same scoring definitions in assessing student performance. Subsequently, it is important to make sure that a certain percentage of *randomly selected* student artifacts is assessed by two raters to demonstrate that consistency in scoring is maintained. While there are no hard and fast rules for the number required, checking reliability on around 20% of the student artifacts would likely satisfy GEAR. (Note: This percentage may be lower or higher, depending on the total number of students being assessed.)

Many campuses have used such an approach in implementing campus-based general education assessment. Specifically, since most assessment is course-embedded, a common strategy has been for the faculty member teaching the course to provide one set of ratings (i.e., since s/he had to evaluate the student product anyway as part of the student's grade), meaning that a second, independent scorer is needed for only around 20% of the student products.

16. What does GEAR recommend regarding student sampling for assessing general education? Here's a specific example: During the semester in which a campus is scheduled to assess Mathematics, enrollment records show that 1,500 students are taking courses that have been approved through SUNY for the Mathematics GE student learning outcomes. Overall, there are 12 of these courses - and a total of 15 course sections – being offered. Does the campus have to include every course, course section, and/or student in the assessment?

GEAR does not require that every course, every course section, or every student be assessed when a particular student learning outcome area is being evaluated. It does recommend that the assessment include at least 20% of the total number of students enrolled in the particular student learning outcomes area at the time of the assessment. It is also important that the assessment data yielded by the campus be *representative* of all students enrolled in courses in the particular student learning outcomes area at the time of the assessment. The best way to ensure this is to use random selection when choosing the GE-approved course sections to be included in the assessment. To illustrate, in assessing a particular student learning outcomes area, campuses would randomly select – from all

GE-approved course sections being offered during that semester approved for that learning outcome area – those course sections to be included in the assessment.

Referring to the above example, the campus in its assessment of the Mathematics outcomes would randomly select, out of the 15 course sections being offered, enough course sections to ensure that at least 300 students (i.e., 20% of the 1,500 students enrolled) were included in its assessment of the outcomes. Of course, it is also desirable to ensure that as many course sections as possible be included. For example, it would not be representative if the sample consisted of one section that had 300 students enrolled.

Campuses can also refer to the GEAR FAQ page for more detail on this issue and others, at: <http://www.cortland.edu/gear/FAQs.html>.

17. It is relatively easy to determine appropriate sampling for the Mathematics outcomes and the Basic Communication [Written] outcomes, since specific courses have been approved through the SUNY GER process as covering these outcomes. However, as an “infused competency,” Critical Thinking poses a challenge in this regard. How does GEAR recommend campuses approach this issue?

This is a challenge, since as an infused competency Critical Thinking is intended to be taught in all SUNY general education courses, but assessing 20% of all students enrolled in a given semester in GE-approved courses would be a tall order for most institutions. As such, the GEAR Group has accepted a variety of approaches proposed by campuses in sampling for Critical Thinking. As one example, some campuses have specifically designated some courses as being “critical thinking intensive” across the general education curriculum. In another approach, some campuses have limited the assessment of critical thinking to general education courses that students are more likely to take toward the end of their experience at the institution (i.e., based on the assumption that critical thinking is a higher-order ability best assessed after the student has had considerable exposure to the general education curriculum).

GEAR is receptive to both of these approaches, and there are likely other strategies they would approve as well. *A key factor is that the approach developed by campuses yield data that are representative of the general education program as a whole.* So, for example, GEAR would likely not accept a sampling strategy that limited the assessment of Critical Thinking to only one or two courses or that involved only a small percentage of students enrolled in general education courses.

18. Are campuses allowed to “mix and match” in their approach to assessing the three different student learning outcomes areas for SCBA?

Yes. It is perfectly acceptable, for example, for a campus to indicate it will use the discipline-based panel’s rubrics to assess Mathematics, its own local rubrics to assess Basic Communication [Written], and the ACT test to assess Critical Thinking.

19. At this point in time, what options are available to campuses interested in using nationally-normed measures?

The instruments that have been approved by SUNY for meeting the objectives of SCBA include ACT’s Critical Thinking for Critical Thinking, ACT’s Writing Essay CAAP Module (for Writing Outcome #1), and ACT’s Writing Skills CAAP Module (for Writing Outcome #2). Information about these tests may be found at: <http://www.act.org/caap/suny/>.

At present there is no nationally-normed test approved by SUNY for the Mathematics outcomes, so campuses intending to use such a test should simply indicate those intentions when they submit their SCBA plan. System Administration fully expects a nationally-normed test for Mathematics to be available in the near future, and will notify campuses when that time arrives. Campuses intending to use this test will then be expected to update their plans to reflect this information, making it clear that they will administer this test no later than the 2008-09 academic year. It may make sense for campuses interested in using a nationally-normed test for Mathematics to schedule the assessment of Mathematics during 2007-08 or 2008-09, since it may not be ready for use during 2006-07.

While campuses are free to propose using other nationally-normed measures, they would have to demonstrate to GEAR that these measures both map to the SUNY learning outcomes and are capable of yielding sub-scores that provide information on each of the learning outcomes included in a learning outcomes area (e.g., a normed test that yields only a global score for Critical Thinking and not two sub-scores that map to the two learning outcomes included under Critical Thinking would not be appropriate).

20. Do campuses have to use either the NSSE or the CCSSE in assessing student engagement?

No, but campuses will have to demonstrate to GEAR that the instrument they have selected as an alternative to NSSE or CCSSE is suitable to their campus environment and is appropriate in terms of content (i.e., measures students' engagement in academic activities) as well as psychometric properties (i.e. is valid, reliable, and is administered in such a way that will ensure representative sampling).

21. Criterion #6 in the GEAR Guidelines states that campuses have to provide for the “consideration of the possible relationships between academic assessment results” and environmental factors as identified on the NSSE or the CCSSE. What is GEAR expecting campuses to do in order to address this criterion?

While some campuses may actually undertake statistical analysis in attempting to establish relationships between the Mathematics, Critical Thinking [Reasoning], and Basic Communication [Written] outcomes data and the NSSE/CCSSE data, GEAR will not require a statistical approach. What is important to GEAR is that it is clear from the campus' assessment plan that there are mechanisms in place on a campus for examining the student learning outcome results as well as the NSSE/CCSSE data, trying to discern patterns between the data sets, and, most important, identifying ways to make improvements as appropriate.

22. In GEAR's view, what role should students play in the GE assessment process?

GEAR strongly encourages campuses to involve students in the process of assessing student learning outcomes in general education, consistent with the campus' own existing curriculum and governance processes and structures. Historically, System Administration and GEAR have worked closely with the SUNY Student Assembly throughout the implementation of SUNY-wide GE assessment, and the Student Assembly was particularly helpful and supportive during the development of the SCBA guidelines. Further, GEAR's membership includes two students.