



SUNY's General Education Assessment Review Group – “Tips” for Completing Closing the Loop Reports

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, resulting in the approval of plans from all 57 SUNY campuses with GE programs. Although “ongoing review” of campus GE assessment plans should have started in 2004-05 (since many campuses would have completed their first three-year round of GE assessment), in June 2004 the SUNY Board of Trustees passed a resolution on “Strengthened Campus-Based Assessment” requiring changes in SUNY-wide GE assessment and charged GEAR to oversee that process.

With implementation of Strengthened Campus-Based Assessment (SCBA) starting in 2006-07, GEAR is now ready to begin the “ongoing review” component of its charge, which specifically stipulates that such review should *“apply the criteria utilized in the initial process review with an emphasis on the extent to which campuses demonstrate their use of assessment results to improve their General Education programs.”* In mid-October 2007 GEAR sent to campus academic officers a memo describing its plans to enact ongoing review of GE assessment, saying that campuses would be expected to submit, every three years, a report consisting of two sections: 1) one providing a detailed description of changes the campus has made or intends to make to its existing General Education Assessment Plan; and 2) one focusing on how the campus has used the assessment process and results to improve its General Education program as well as to revise the assessment process itself (i.e., “Closing the Loop”).

Since the October communication, GEAR has received a number of queries from campuses regarding this triennial report, particularly with respect to the Closing the Loop (CTL) report requirements. GEAR has therefore developed a series of FAQs intended to assist campuses in this task as well as the attached review form GEAR will use to examine CTL reports. The FAQs provide clarifications and examples of the items addressed in the review sheet. Please keep in mind that the information included in the answers to the FAQs and on the review form reflect good assessment practices taken from a variety of sources, and it is not expected that most campuses will be engaging in all of these practices, especially since SUNY-wide GE assessment is still in the early stages of development. We do, however, encourage campuses to consider strengthening their CTL activities using this information, since the improvement of teaching and learning remains the best reason for campuses to assess student learning.

Frequently Asked Questions About Closing the Loop Reports

1. What is “Closing the Loop” as it relates to the assessment of student learning?

Closing the Loop, or CTL, refers to a wide variety of outcomes and actions that result from an institution’s review and consideration of student learning outcomes assessment data. Critical to this process is that these revisions are made on the basis of qualitative and quantitative data that are gathered systematically, not on the basis of anecdotal evidence or intuition. CTL outcomes and actions tend to fall into the following categories:

Making Improvements to Teaching, Courses, or Curricular Programs

Most often, CTL refers to mechanisms through which involved faculty/staff make changes to courses, instruction, or programs based on their review of assessment data.¹ A fuller discussion and examples of this CTL category are provided below in Question 5.

Disseminating Assessment Results to Appropriate Members of the Campus Community

According to Middle States’ *Characteristics of Excellence* (2006), an institution should be able to provide evidence that student learning assessment information is shared and discussed with appropriate constituents so that there is a general understanding of student performance which can lead to either maintaining existing practices or recommendations for improvement. A fundamental part of this process is the development of *a priori* expectations for student performance on the assessment, so that it is clear the extent to which students have either met or not met standards.

In addition, institutions that have had particular success in the assessment of student learning have typically had mechanisms in place to assure a broader awareness and knowledge of assessment results, campus-wide discussion of those results, shared decision-making, and celebrating assessment successes. Of course, it is important to ensure that these results are reported and disseminated in such a way that individual faculty cannot be identified. Still, allowing the larger campus community access to assessment data provides important insights into how students are performing generally and can lead to valuable intra-institutional discussions on that performance and how it might be improved.

Evaluating and Revising the Assessment Process

It is also appropriate to use assessment results to evaluate – and revise as appropriate – the assessment process itself. In evaluating the assessment process, modifications may be considered that would improve the relevance and/or the effectiveness of the assessment.

Guiding the Planning and Implementation of Professional Development Activities

It is not unusual for academic departments and programs to realize as a result of the assessment process that faculty and staff responsible for delivering the curriculum could benefit from additional training or development opportunities. In some cases, these

¹ Since SUNY campuses vary with respect to how many general education assessment rounds they have completed, CTL reports may focus on changes campuses have already made and assessed or changes they have made but not yet assessed.

opportunities might involve activities related to the assessment of student learning. Or, they may focus on new pedagogical strategies intended to enhance the curriculum.

2. Will GEAR's review of campuses' CTL reports lead to recommendations of approval or non-approval, as is the case with GEAR's review of campus GE assessment plans?

No. GEAR intends to use CTL information submitted by campuses for two purposes: 1) to ensure that campuses continue to improve their General Education assessment plans and are using assessment results to close the loop; and 2) to use this process as an opportunity to identify good assessment practices that can be shared system-wide. Eventually, GEAR hopes to disseminate information from good practice institutions so that other campuses can learn from and model those practices.

In order to assist in the identification of good CTL practices, GEAR will evaluate campuses' CTL reports, using the attached form, and will provide that evaluation to the campus for the campus' own consideration and use. But, these evaluations will be entirely formative and intended to assist campuses in their future assessment efforts rather than imply approval or disapproval of campus practices.

3. How will GEAR share CTL good assessment practices across the SUNY System?

GEAR intends to use a variety of strategies for this purpose, including the establishment of a SUNY-wide Website that is updated regularly and features effective examples of how campuses have used assessment to improve teaching and learning and curricular programs; disseminated assessment results to the campus community; strengthened the assessment process; and fostered faculty development activities. In addition, GEAR hopes to sponsor a conference in the near future focusing on general education assessment, as it did in 2001, 2003, and 2005.

4. Is the CTL process the sole responsibility of individual departments or programs?

No. In fact, it is most likely that academic departments and programs with effective CTL strategies in place are located in institutions that value, promote, and support the assessment of student learning and the use of assessment data to improve teaching and learning. This is true for a number of reasons, including the fact that CTL requires a department or program to reveal both its strengths and weaknesses, which will only occur in a supportive institutional context. Similarly, good practice CTL activities frequently require the infusion of resources into a program (e.g., to fund filling a gap in the curriculum, faculty development activities, or enhanced support services for students). Colleges and universities that have a strong institutional commitment to assessment are characterized by a non-punitive assessment philosophy and a willingness to allocate funding on the basis of sound assessment data.

5. How would a campus demonstrate the effective use of assessment results to improve its general education program?

Such improvements may manifest themselves in a variety of ways and be targeted toward courses, entire programs, pedagogy, and/or support services. GEAR does not make value judgments about which of these ways or foci are more important, but does expect the campus to be able to describe for a particular assessment the following: 1) what was found and what the faculty/staff thought it meant; and 2) specific changes, as appropriate, recommended by the faculty/staff that link clearly to the assessment findings. With time and the repeated assessment

of specific outcomes, it will become possible to determine if these improvements lead to an improvement in student learning.

In order to reinforce the importance of institutional commitment in the assessment process, as discussed above in question 4, campuses should also be sure in their CTL reports to describe the allocation or reallocation of resources to make changes in its general education program on the basis of previous assessment findings.

Examples of using assessment results to improve programs include:

- Adding an emphasis on research methodology to specific target courses in a program
- Infusing student learning outcomes (e.g., critical thinking, information management) throughout a curricular program
- Supplementing lecture presentations with the opportunity for class discussions
- Providing more options for support services (e.g., peer tutoring) for students
- Adding faculty lines to a foreign language department in order to decrease class size

6. How would a campus demonstrate the effective dissemination, sharing, and discussion of assessment results?

There are a variety of ways in which assessment results may be effectively disseminated. The process will depend largely on each campus' approved governance review structure in this regard. This aspect of CTL is referenced as Criterion #9 in the General Education Assessment Review Process Guidelines: *"The assessment process includes provisions for evaluating the assessment process itself and disseminating assessment results to the appropriate campus community."*

GEAR expects the campus to be able to: 1) describe the mechanisms in place to ensure that all appropriate faculty, departments, support staff, and administrators have been informed of assessment results; 2) provide documentation that assessment results have been reviewed, shared, and evaluated by the appropriate campus community; 3) illustrate how this CTL activity resulted in recommendations for modification of the process; and 4) indicate how such modification resulted in more effective use of assessment results and improved student learning (depending on whether or not an assessment of the modified practice has been conducted).

Some examples of effective strategies for disseminating, discussing, and using assessment results include:

- Providing faculty in a specific department aggregate data from student learning outcomes assessments, ensuring that individual faculty members received non-aggregated data only from their own courses
- Facilitating the discussion of assessment results within specific departments and embracing recommendations for change
- Providing counseling, admissions, curriculum, and advisement areas with aggregate data from the outcomes assessments
- Communicating changes that have resulted from CTL activities to all appropriate campus constituents
- Posting aggregate data on the institution's Website from student assessments and inviting members of the campus community to comment on the results
- Integrating planning decisions where assessment results have been systematically used to inform institutional planning and the allocation of resources

7. How would a campus demonstrate celebration of assessment successes?

Middle States' assessment materials emphasize that a campus' assessment successes should be positively reinforced so that the campus community realizes that the institution values and rewards these successes. Some examples of effective strategies for celebrating assessment successes include:

- Holding an "Assessment Day" on campus, featuring presentations by departments or programs on assessments and results
- Disseminating successful accomplishments in the improvement of student learning through the campus Website, faculty and staff newsletters, and student publications
- Sharing effective assessment successes with colleagues at other institutions
- Receiving continued institutional support and resources for ongoing assessment activities
- Recognizing programs that have been especially effectiveness in assessing student learning as "best practice" programs
- Establishing institutional budgeting priorities based on effective assessment practices

8. How would a campus demonstrate the effective evaluation of and revision to its existing general education assessment plan?

In order to have its existing general education assessment plan approved by GEAR, a campus had to include a discussion of how it would bring about this very process. While there may be any number of ways to accomplish it, this process should be characterized by the following steps: 1) review of the assessment process by faculty and staff members involved in the assessment; 2) the opportunity for the campus community, as appropriate, to provide feedback; 3) development of a new assessment plan, taking this feedback into account, by individuals/groups with the responsibility for doing so based on the campus' existing curriculum/governance processes; and, 4) review and approval by the campus' governance body.

Examples of revisions to a campus' general education assessment plan include the following:

- Revising a measure because students either significantly over-performed or under-performed based on faculty members' *a priori* expectations
- Using multiple measures, both qualitative and quantitative, because obtained results from one measure seem counter-intuitive or overly simplistic
- Moving the assessment of an infused competency (e.g., critical thinking) until later in students' academic progression because of the realization that students require more exposure to and practice for this competency
- Revising rubrics because it becomes clear that existing rubrics did not adequately differentiate student performance

9. How would a campus demonstrate effective implementation of professional development activities based on assessment results?

In some cases, ideas for professional development activities related to assessment will stem from a perceived problem or weakness in the assessment process. In other cases, these activities result from weak student performance on learning assessments. Further, professional development activities may be more formal, taking place off campus as part of a conference or workshop, or may be relatively informal, organized by campus faculty themselves. As is the case with other

CTL activities, what is key is that faculty and staff members review assessment results and decide among themselves what actions may help lead to improvement in future assessments.

Examples of this CTL activity are as follows:

- Faculty members participate in a workshop on how to develop, administer and score writing rubrics for writing because an existing rubric failed to differentiate adequately between levels of student performance
- Faculty members attend a conference on active learning strategies because students are not performing adequately in response to lectures
- Faculty in a particular department hold norming sessions because of difficulty obtaining good inter-observer reliability on qualitative assessments

10. “Closing the Loop” clearly encompasses a great many activities. Would a campus’ CTL report have to include examples of all these activities in order to be considered a good practice institution?

No. As stated in the introduction to the FAQs, it is unlikely that any institution will be doing everything described in this document, meaning that GEAR will select components from campuses’ CTL reports to share with other institutions. It is hoped that this sharing of information, along with the good practices GEAR researched and included in these FAQs, will stimulate SUNY campuses to be more planful and specific in their own CTL activities for future assessments.

11. Does a campus’ CTL report have to address all 10 Knowledge and Skills Areas and 2 Infused Competencies that make up the SUNY GER?

As much as possible campuses should make an attempt in its CTL report to provide GEAR with a comprehensive and complete description of Closing the Loop activities undertaken since SUNY-wide general education assessment began, since this approach will be most likely to yield the range of good assessment practices GEAR hopes to identify and share across SUNY. However, it is not necessary for campuses to go into great detail regarding the process that was used in CTL for each student learning outcome area, especially if a similar process was used across areas.