



General Education Assessment Review (GEAR) Group

Meeting: December 20, 2005, SUNY System Administration Boardroom, Albany

Present: Don Boyce, Richard Collier, Frances Dearing, Patricia Francis (co-chair), Robert Golden, Tina Good (co-chair), Peter Knuepfer, Peter Nickerson, Patricia Pietropaolo, Kimberley Reiser, Rose Rudnitski,

Participating by Teleconference: Robert Axelrod, John Caraluzzo, Donna Cox, Carolyn Curtis, Mary Jane Feldman, Joy Hendrick, Milton Johnson, Peter Sinden, Melanie Vainder (co-chair)

Regrets: Stephanie Adika, Susan Bello, Carolyn Haessig, Joseph Hildreth, Maryann Justinger

I. Welcome and Announcements

Patricia Francis welcomed everyone, noting that this was the first GEAR meeting since the April 2005 conference on strengthened campus-based assessment (SCBA) and that full membership had only been achieved early in December 2005. She also expressed her regrets at having to call the meeting on such late notice, adding that there will be more advance notice for future meetings. Hopefully, another meeting can be held sometime in mid-January 2006.

There was then discussion of how GEAR meeting minutes might best be approved and distributed. There was general agreement that, after receiving the draft minutes electronically from Francis, GEAR members will have 10 days to review them and provide suggestions for change. After that point, the minutes will be finalized and posted in various venues (e.g., Assessment Listserve, GEAR Web site).

Francis also announced the following:

- The date for campuses to submit SCBA plans was extended by University Provost Peter D. Salins from November 30, 2005 to February 15, 2006.
- She is still in the process of setting up training sessions for new members, with three likely to be held, one in the Albany area, one in Central New York, and one closer to Western New York. She will contact new members early in January to set firm dates and times for these sessions. While it would be ideal to get the training sessions in before the next GEAR meeting, the crucial date is February 15, when the new campus plans are due.
- The new SUNY general education math outcomes, developed by ACGE and approved by Provost Salins, went into effect Fall 2005, and may be found at: <http://www.cortland.edu/gear/MathOutcomes.pdf>. Campus reporting forms have also been revised to reflect these changes, and may be found at: <http://www.cortland.edu/gear/General%20Education%20Report%20Form110205.pdf>.

II. SCBA Updates

Francis introduced GEAR co-chairs Melanie Vainder and Tina Good, saying that much has happened related to the implementation of SCBA over the last 6 months and that it is important for the GEAR Group to have a good understanding of the current status of that implementation. Francis then provided information relevant to the funding of SCBA, NSSE/CCSSE, and the Writing outcomes. (She also referred GEAR members unfamiliar with this information to several communications sent out by Provost Salins, which may be found at: <http://www.cortland.edu/gear/news.html> (under the section entitled "SCBA Implementation Updates").

With respect to funding, System Administration has affirmed on several occasions its intentions to fund the implementation of SCBA, with a sampling limitation for the three outcomes areas (i.e., up to 20% of the students

enrolled in the outcomes area at the time of the assessment). Francis pointed out that this limit on sampling corresponds to what GEAR has always required, and she added that, in cases in which campuses have sampled more than the 20% through the first round of campus-based general education assessment, System Administration will consider funding those additional students, although firm commitments are not possible until it is clear what campuses intend to do and how much SCBA is likely to cost. For the NSSE/CCSSE, Francis said that the organizations that administer these surveys have their own sampling protocols, and that SUNY campuses will have to adhere to those protocols in order to participate. She also said that funding for the standardized tests and the NSSE/CCSSE will be centrally coordinated by SUNY System, therefore making it easier (i.e., compared to the rubrics) to determine exactly how much these components of SCBA will cost and to ensure that campuses do not have to expend their resources up front. It will be more difficult to manage payment for campus activities that result from the administration of the rubrics, but she and Executive Vice Provost Anne Huot have met with Finance and Management staff and are attempting to develop a plan for this purpose. In response to a question from Kimberley Reiser, Francis said that she was not sure what SUNY's policy would be for reimbursing campuses for the development of rubrics (i.e., since the three discipline-based panels made up of SUNY faculty have gone to great efforts to develop quality rubrics for the three outcomes areas), and that she would have to run that question by Provost Salins. Francis agreed to pull together a listing of campus activities – in administering both nationally-normed tests and rubrics – likely to be funded by System under SCBA.

Francis then turned to a discussion of the NSSE/CCSSE, saying that she has spoken on numerous occasions with representatives from the organizations that produce these surveys, and that it is possible that they might be administered as early as Spring 2007, although this schedule may be affected by funding availability. The Student Opinion Survey (SOS) will likely continue to be administered – with its next scheduled administration in Spring 2006 – though revisions are likely, especially in areas where it overlaps with the NSSE/CCSSE. Responding to a question from Reiser, Francis said that the SOS does not appear to be a satisfactory measure for campuses to use in assessing academic environment for SCBA, largely because it only tangentially measures student engagement and instead focuses on students' perceptions of campus programs and services.

Finally, Francis informed the group that, based largely on a discussion that began at the April 2005 SCBA conference, the third learning outcome under Basic Communication [Written] (i.e., "Research a topic, develop an argument, and organize supporting details") has been eliminated from SCBA, though at least for now this outcome remains part of campus-based general education assessment. This decision by Provost Salins was based on input from campuses and consultation with the Writing discipline-based panel, which suggested that assessing this outcome using externally-referenced measures (either rubrics or standardized tests) would be quite difficult and time-intensive. Provost Salins has also asked the GEAR Group to look into this matter and make recommendations as to how campuses might deal with this outcome, so this issue will be part of GEAR's work this year. During brief discussion, the point was made that there is considerable overlap between this outcome and several others (e.g., Critical Thinking, Information Management), raising the possibility that there is no need for such an outcome under Writing. Francis said that GEAR would take the matter up but that any recommendations the group makes would have to go before ACGE and, ultimately, approved by Provost Salins.

In response to a comment from Rose Rudnitski, who noted that her campus has developed very good assessments for the third writing outcome, Francis said that GEAR sets minimum standards for general education assessment, and that campuses should feel free to continue their past practices in this area (i.e., campuses that have developed a good methodology for assessing this third outcome may certainly continue to do so regardless of what SUNY requires).

Tina Good then provided an update on the development of the rubrics by the three discipline-based panels, noting that this process had basically taken all summer, and that SUNY had paid external consultants (Kathleen Yancey, Richard Jardine) to work with the panels in order to assure the rubrics were of high quality and consistent with national standards. After the consultants approved the rubrics, the final drafts were sent out to SUNY faculty for feedback and, ultimately, were approved by the Faculty Council of Community Colleges and the University Faculty Senate. As has always been the case, the final drafts of the rubrics, may be accessed from the GEAR Web site, at <http://www.cortland.edu/gear/news.html>.

Melanie Vainder then provided a similar update on the development of standardized tests for use in SCBA. To this point, ACT has provided a test for Critical Thinking, which has already been piloted by a number of campuses, and has also offered two tests to address the two writing outcomes. These tests may be reviewed at a special Web site set up for SUNY by ACT, at <http://www.act.org/caap/suny>. Currently, a test does not exist for assessing mathematics, in large part due to the difficulty of developing a measure that adequately addresses the

five different learning outcomes included under the SUNY Mathematics GER. ACT continues to work on such a test, and hopefully one will exist in the near future. Campuses have been informed through communications from Provost Salins that if they are interested in using a standardized test to assess Mathematics, they can simply state as such when they submit their SCBA plan to GEAR.

III. GEAR Membership

Francis introduced this topic by reminding old members/informing new members that in Fall 2004 Provost Salins approved new membership criteria for GEAR with respect to term limits and leadership. These criteria are as follows:

- Total membership will consist of 26 individuals: 10 nominated by the University Faculty Senate, 10 by the Faculty Council of Community Colleges, two by the Student Assembly, and four by the University Provost;
- Membership terms will last three years, and a “staggered” membership established when this agreement becomes effective so that approximately 1/3 serve for one year, 1/3 for two years, and 1/3 for three years; and
- Leadership will be provided by three co-chairs: One from the state-operated sector, one from the community college sector, and one appointed by the University Provost.

Although these criteria went into effect in Fall 2004, GEAR did not achieve full membership until a few weeks ago. In addition, there really has been no work for GEAR to do since this group’s next big challenge is the evaluation of campuses’ SCBA plans, beginning in February 2006. As such, Francis has not to this point determined how the staggered terms will be assigned, and she asked for guidance in this matter. It was agreed that co-chairs should automatically be assigned three-year terms, and that current GEAR members who for their own reasons are interested in shorter terms should notify Francis of this fact. Other than these conditions, Francis will randomly assign existing members to one-, two-, or three-year terms, consulting with Vainder and Good. Before the next GEAR Group meeting, term conditions should be established. Francis noted that, since terms may be renewed for up to six consecutive years, a GEAR member’s initial term length is not that important.

IV. Evaluating SCBA Plans – Process and Timeline

Francis led this discussion, noting that while the extension of the due date for SCBA plans until February was a positive development for campuses, it does give GEAR less time to review and approve the plans. SUNY System Administration has defined “full implementation” of SCBA as all 57 campuses with general education assessment programs having their SCBA plans approved by GEAR. It would be ideal if this could happen by the beginning of the Fall 2006 semester, but if not GEAR should definitely aim to have all plans approved by the end of Fall 2006 since that is the semester specified in the SUNY Board of Trustees’ resolution on SCBA.

Although Francis acknowledged that GEAR has plenty of hard work ahead, she said that it is reasonable to expect that the group can meet the Board of Trustees’ deadline, for several reasons. First, after three years of campus-based general education assessment, most campuses are much more sophisticated about and comfortable with assessment. Second, SCBA only requires campuses to specify what they intend to do in three outcomes areas (i.e., Critical Thinking, Math, Writing) as opposed to all twelve areas and, choices are pretty limited (e.g., the use of standardized tests vs. the panel rubrics vs. local rubrics). Other than this information, the only new information required involves the use of the NSSE/CCSSE.

Francis reminded the group that, in the first general education assessment round, GEAR used forms for evaluating campus plans and that the GEAR co-chairs would adapt these forms for use in SCBA and provide them to GEAR for feedback. In addition, after ensuring during the first round that the GEAR Group was applying similar standards to the evaluation of the plans (by evaluating several plans as a whole and discussing them), GEAR was divided into small sub-groups headed up by a team leader who was responsible for aggregating sub-group evaluations and writing a unified review of the plan. In this way, each sub-group was only responsible for 7-8 plans. It was agreed that such an approach was reasonable for evaluating SCBA plans, but that it was really important for the group as a whole to evaluate a few plans together and discuss them before the sub-groups begin their work. Francis agreed, adding that she, Vainder, and Good would be meeting prior to the next GEAR meeting to take a close look at the SCBA criteria and to revise the scoring sheets.

There was then considerable discussion about different aspects of SCBA. In response to one question, Francis confirmed that two community colleges have indicated that they do not intend to conform to the use of externally-referenced measures for Writing, Critical Thinking, and Mathematics as called for under the SCBA guidelines. She explained further that community colleges are not bound by Board of Trustees' resolutions so these campuses are within their rights not to participate. Francis reminded the GEAR Group that this issue is not relevant to GEAR's work, since GEAR plays no role in monitoring or ensuring campuses' adherence to SUNY assessment guidelines. She added that, these two campuses aside, the campuses she has visited and had contact with have been very responsive and positive about SCBA, especially SUNY's willingness to fund this effort, including the administration of the NSSE/CCSSE (or comparable instrument). Along these lines, she said that campuses that do not participate will not benefit from the highly valuable information provided by the CCSSE (or comparable instrument), and they may find themselves at odds with Middle States, which has been very supportive of the SUNY Assessment Initiative. As a final comment, Francis said that System intends to continue communication with the two campuses that have decided not to participate in SCBA, in the hopes that their objections to the process may be resolved.

Final discussion centered on a number of misconceptions that appear to exist across campuses regarding preparing their revised SCBA plans. For instance, some campuses seem to think that they need to address all 12 student learning outcome areas when in fact they only have to address the three affected by SCBA. On the basis of this discussion, Francis agreed to prepare a list of "tips" for campuses to follow in preparing their final plan for SCBA, adding that these tips would not have bearing on the substance of the campus plan (e.g., the decision to use rubrics vs. a standardized test) but would instead focus on the formatting of the plan. These tips will be distributed via the Assessment Listserve and added to the GEAR Web site (i.e., as SCBA "FAQ's"). Francis agreed to finalize these tips in the next two weeks or so and share them with GEAR for their feedback.

V. Future Role of GEAR Group

As a final agenda item, the group discussed the evolving role of GEAR, and how this group might better serve campuses in the future. Francis pointed out that, in the final report of the Provost's Advisory Task Force on the Assessment of Student Learning Outcomes as well as Provost Salins' charge to the GEAR Group on its formation, GEAR was to provide "initial and ongoing review" of campuses' general education assessment plans. Indeed, if SCBA had not come along, GEAR would have already begun the phase of providing "ongoing review," since with 2004-05 most campuses have completed their first three-year round of general education assessment. Francis noted that this issue has been the source of some confusion to campuses, and that most campuses have not submitted "Round 2" plans for review. She also admitted that she has not provided communication about this matter to campuses, since it was her feeling that SUNY colleges are feeling overwhelmed at this point with getting their SCBA plans in. Nevertheless, GEAR members felt strongly that some clarification of this matter was needed, and Francis agreed to weave something in about second round plans in the list of "tips" she will prepare for campuses on SCBA.

Other suggestions were made as to how GEAR might better serve campuses in the future, with the majority of group members indicating that GEAR should be seen more as a source of support for campuses in the area of assessment. In addition, GEAR could sponsor regional conferences or workshops and provide campuses with information on best assessment practices across the system.

The meeting adjourned at 1:15 p.m.

The next GEAR Group meeting has been scheduled, for Thursday, January 12, 2006, from 10 a.m. – 2 p.m. at SUNY System Administration.