SUNY General Education Assessment Conference
“Campus-Based Assessment of General Education: A Collaborative Dialogue”

Introduction and Conference Overview

by

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Dr. Steven’s Remarks

Good afternoon everyone. On behalf of the General Education Assessment Review group (GEAR), I would like to welcome you to the SUNY General Education Assessment Conference.

We are here—more than 140 faculty, administrators, professional staff, and students from across the University—to talk, to listen, to engage in a collaborative dialogue, and to learn. I would like to particularly welcome newly-elected SUNY governance leaders Joe Hildreth, President-elect of the University Faculty Senate and Bob Axelrod, President of the Faculty Council of Community Colleges—and to extend our sincere appreciation to their predecessors, Joe Flynn and Herb Merrill, who have worked so thoughtfully and collegially to move this process forward. A warm welcome also to Trustee Christopher Holland, Nancy Willie-Schiff of the Office of Higher Education of the State Education Department and Oswald Ratteray from the Middle States Commission on Higher Education.

If I may, I would like to take just a moment to thank a number of people who have given so generously of their time and expertise to help organize this conference: Paul Grover, Vice Provost for Academic Affairs at the Health Science Center at Syracuse, Margaret Bourke of the Office of the Vice Provost, Melanie Vainder, Director of General Education and Chair of the Assessment Advisory Board at Farmingdale, Kelly Layburn of Media Resources at Farmingdale, George Manning, Special Events Coordinator at Cortland, Robert Ploutz-Synder, Director of Institutional Research and Assessment at Cortland, Jack Meacham, Distinguished Teaching Professor and Chair of the Department of Psychology at the University at Buffalo, and the members of the Task Force on the Assessment of Student Learning Outcomes and the GEAR group and for all their hard work, commitment, and vision.

Goals

As I’ve said on a number of occasions, at a time when the State University is actively working toward a stronger, even more prominent position in the front ranks of American public higher education, one of our top priorities is improving the quality of undergraduate education.
We have a responsibility to our students, to the State of New York, and to all constituencies of the University to set a standard of excellence in this area that meets and ultimately exceeds those of our national peers.

It is now widely recognized throughout higher education that a robust and comprehensive program for assessing student learning outcomes is a key aspect of initiatives intended to improve learning. National and regional accrediting bodies (including Middle States) insist that institutions implement outcomes assessment, and, closer to home (in New York), the State Education Department will soon require that “each degree-granting college and university engage in ongoing, systematic assessment of its educational effectiveness and use the results of its assessments to improve its quality and effectiveness.”

Mandates aside, the emphasis on assessment as a means of improving learning is clearly in the best interests of our students and faculty: faculty, especially, have a real stake in knowing whether their teaching is effective. I was speaking several weeks ago with Marvin LaHood, Co-Chair of the Undergraduate Committee of the University Faculty Senate about the vital role that assessment can play as a catalyst for faculty dialogue, the life-force of the academy. This engagement—or “collaborative dialogue” (as we’ve subtitled our conference)—is fundamental to assessment having a real impact on the teaching and learning process.

A Personal Story

When I think back on my seventeen years as a faculty member at McGill University where I was chair of musical composition, I remember how important that dialogue was. At the end of every year, the full-time faculty met to review our students work (in portfolios). We didn’t use the term assessment (I’m not sure any of us knew the term), but we were, in fact, talking about whether or not our students were learning and meeting our expectations (or learning objectives). In the early days—before we engaged in this kind of dialogue, we often made assumptions about student learning on the basis of course descriptions. When we actually began to assess outcomes, we soon discovered that sometimes the learning we thought was taking
Assessment in SUNY

Assessment initiatives within the State University of New York go back a long time, to the late 1970s in fact, when individual faculty members and administrative leaders began to understand that coherent assessment strategies could lead to improved learning. By the early 1990s assessment had become a priority within the University. SUNY faculty and the Office of the Provost worked diligently and collaboratively to develop a coherent approach that would serve the students’ interests and the University’s need for meaningful information regarding learning outcomes.

We’ve now picked up where we left off and renewed our commitment to assessment: we’re here today to learn, to engage one another, to ask questions, and to share information and experiences as we begin to implement assessment of General Education on our campuses.

Throughout this whole process—my very good colleague and co-chair has been Patricia Francis, professor and former chair of the Department of Psychology at Cortland (where she now serves as Executive Assistant to the President). Patty has been involved with assessment for many years: she is a very knowledgeable and passionate advocate for assessment, as well as extraordinarily patient and generous with those of us who are new to all of this.

Patty will now tell you about the goals and objectives of the conference, and give you a sense of what we hope to accomplish.

Dr. Francis’ Remarks

Thanks Don. I too would like to welcome everyone on behalf of the GEAR Group, and to thank everyone—especially the GEAR Group members, our conference presenters and others Don acknowledged—who helped make this event possible. As you know, our being here today is
a direct result of the work done by the Provost’s Advisory Task Force on Assessing Student Learning Outcomes. This committee offered in its November 2000 final report a set of recommendations which, taken together, form the foundation for a comprehensive SUNY Assessment Initiative. From my perspective, this project has the potential to have an unprecedented impact on the higher education community nationwide and, in a very real way, this conference represents the beginning of this work, certainly in terms of our meeting and discussing it as a community.

**Patty’s Personal Story**

First, not to be outdone by Don, I too have a personal story. It was two years ago this fall that I received a call from Steve Poskanzer at System Administration asking if I would consider co-chairing a System-wide task force on assessment. He asked me to come to Albany to meet with himself, Provost Salins, and a new associate provost at System who would co-chair the task force with me, Dr. Donald Steven. For my own interest, I asked Steve what Don’s field was. Imagine how reassured I was to hear that Don had been trained in, of all things, musical composition!

I have to say I was intrigued by Steve’s offer, but I was also skeptical and not overly optimistic. I had watched with great interest in the early 1990’s as SUNY made assessment a highly public priority, and I was greatly disappointed when these efforts disappeared essentially without a trace. Also, I was very aware that faculty across SUNY campuses had grown increasingly concerned that responsibility for curriculum—especially general education—was slipping away from them. In that context, I knew that generating support—let alone enthusiasm—for an assessment initiative would be difficult if not impossible. Finally, from my own experiences working on assessment at SUNY Cortland and interacting with other campuses, I was all too familiar with the obstacles that make this work so challenging, including faculty and staff resistance, inadequate administrative and institutional support, and legitimate time and resource constraints.
Still, in the end I signed on, in part because the challenge was irresistible. More important, I happen to believe that the assessment process, if valued and taken seriously, can improve virtually every aspect of a department or program. How better to build cohesiveness and collegiality than by getting a group of relatively disparate and usually gnarly individuals to actually agree on what students should learn and know? How better to make those same people feel good about themselves and their lives’ work than by providing a framework that allows them to clearly demonstrate the learning that has taken place? And, how better to maintain control of curriculum and programs than by unequivocally proving their effectiveness?

Almost two years later, I can honestly say that my work with the Provost’s Advisory Task Force on the Assessment of Student Learning Outcomes has been the best professional experience of my life. This group—made up of faculty, staff, students, and administrators from campuses across SUNY as well as representatives from System Administration—worked long and hard to establish the foundation for the Assessment Initiative. I won’t say we never disagreed—we did so frequently. But we disagreed respectfully, and we never stopped listening to each other. Another reason the Task Force was such a positive and productive experience was that members were of one mind with regard to the following principles:

- While there are all kinds of reasons to do assessment, the best reasons relate to improving teaching and learning and to fostering dialogue and community-building among faculty and staff;
- It is essential to respect campus autonomy and the existing structures and processes that exist on individual campuses (e.g., governance, curriculum); and,
- The implementation of a quality assessment initiative requires nurturing and support, both by System Administration and individual campuses.

These same principles will also guide the work of the GEAR Group. As you may know, there is significant overlap between the Task Force and GEAR Group memberships. Further, the GEAR Group is heavily faculty-represented, even more so than the Task Force. You should also know that the GEAR Group could have no better liaison to System Administration than Don Steven. His music composition background actually has served him very well for this role: He is
always composed, he never hits a wrong note, and, at all times, he has conducted himself as a
colleague and a partner in the SUNY Assessment Initiative.

About the Conference

Since the GEAR Group was formed this past February, we have focused almost
exclusively on planning and organizing this conference. At its final meeting last fall, the Task
Force on the Assessment of Student Learning Outcomes agreed that such an event would serve a
critical function in launching campus-based assessment of general education, providing direction
and support as campuses began or continued to develop their assessment plans. That, in fact, is
our primary hope for this event.

Towards that end, you will notice from the conference program that we have structured
sessions according to the Task Force guidelines on developing assessment plans (i.e.,
establishing objectives, identifying learning activities that meet those objectives, developing
assessment measures and criteria, using assessment results to make program improvements). We
are also featuring some “best practice” institutions from within SUNY, including Nassau
Community College and SUNY Fredonia, as well as one from outside, Truman State University
in Missouri. We know that there is great variability among the 64 SUNY institutions with respect
to their assessment programs, and that has made planning the conference a bit challenging. Still,
we have attempted to ensure that all campuses can benefit from what we have to share over the
next two days. It is likely that the most important function of this conference will result from the
opportunity for all of us to talk to and learn from each other.

Finally, in planning the conference the GEAR Group established seven learning
objectives for participants that have been listed in the advance promotional materials and in your
program. In an effort to “practice what we preach,” at the end of the conference we will give you
a chance to evaluate us on how well we met those objectives. We will also compile the results of
the evaluation and share them with you and on the GEAR Group’s web page.

The conference objectives are as follows:
• Construct student learning objectives (outcomes) that can be assessed;
• Develop strategies for identifying program activities that appropriately address programmatic goals and objectives;
• Develop strategies for increasing involvement by faculty, students, and staff in the assessment of student learning outcomes;
• Identify criteria for selection of assessment measures and indices;
• Identify methodological considerations in administration of assessment measures
• Describe ways that assessment results can be used to improve educational programs and the assessment process; and,
• Understand how assessment can help foster faculty dialogue and community-building.

Again, thank you for coming, and enjoy the conference. It is now my pleasure to introduce to you Dr. Mary Jane Feldman, Professor and Director of Institutional Research at Niagara County Community College. Mary Jane, who is a GEAR Group member and also was a member of the Task Force on Assessing Student Learning Outcomes, will introduce our first session.