

2006-2007 Assessment of the General Education Baccalaureate Competencies

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Abstract

The 2006-2007 graduating class participated in a variety of discipline-based and some interdisciplinary capstone experiences that demonstrated their achievement of the four Baccalaureate Competencies: Critical Thinking, Effective Communication, Social Responsibility, and Knowledge Integration. Reviewing a completed three-year cycle, this report summarizes faculty reflections on students' work toward development of the Baccalaureate Competencies and makes recommendations for the next three-year cycle of reporting.



Introduction¹

In the University of Cincinnati's General Education Program, faculty assess learning by evaluating student achievement of the four Baccalaureate Competencies: Critical Thinking, Effective Communication, Social Responsibility, and Knowledge Integration. This assessment takes place primarily within the program/major capstone requirement, where faculty use discipline-specific rubrics to measure student achievement of these four Competencies. Data produced by this process will, over time, yield meaningful information on student learning, achievement of the Baccalaureate Competencies as well as the effectiveness of the unit capstone experiences. This report offers a brief summary of those achievements for the 2006-2007 academic year.

This report further recognizes, however, that measuring student learning in the capstones is only a portion of the work of assessment. University of Cincinnati faculty are committed to improving course quality, exploring innovative learning environments, and creating rich pedagogical experiences both inside the classroom and out in order to facilitate student learning and success at multiple levels. We use a variety of assessment measures—in individual classrooms, through academic units, and at the university level—to obtain feedback. Since the inception of the *capstone assessment procedure* during the 2004-2005 academic year, faculty have reported steady changes to capstone instruction in response to ongoing assessment. This report offers a brief overview of those changes as well as recommendations for further refining and improving assessment of the General Education Program at the University of Cincinnati.

Finally, in close cooperation with the Director of the Center for the Enhancement of Teaching & Learning (CET&L), we requested this year that assessment data be submitted electronically through SurveyMonkey forms. Doing so, as well as “back entering” previous years’ data, allows us to see trends in students’ achievement of the Competencies. Since this academic year (2006-2007) completes the first three-year cycle of data collection and assessment, having access to such a comparative measure shows the long-term efficacy of our General Education Program.

Results

Students who entered the University beginning Fall 2003 and graduated in 2007 with a baccalaureate degree completed the entire General Education Program. The attached spreadsheet details which colleges reported capstone activity; the tabs at the bottom of the spreadsheet provide access to the courses that each college reported as “capstone” courses.

Summary

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¹ In general, this report continues the work that the previous Director of General Education (Dr. Janice Denton, Raymond Walters College) began during the 2004-2005 academic year. This report is modeled on Dr. Denton's first report, issued February 2006.



Baccalaureate Competencies: Critical Thinking, Effective Communication, Social Responsibility, and Knowledge Integration. Such experiences included original research projects, major research papers, field work, construction of portfolios, clinical projects, design projects, senior showcase concerts and productions, management of theater productions, student teaching, senior recitals, and internships. Students worked both collaboratively and individually to complete such projects.

As you can see from the attached spreadsheets, faculty generally rated students' achievement of the Baccalaureate Competencies in the 4-5 range, at the top of the provided scale. Such scores represent significant achievement by students of the four Competencies.

Note: For more discipline-specific data about both student success in achieving the Baccalaureate Competencies and faculty changes to capstone courses, see the collection of individual instructor responses, collected in the General Education Program Capstone Assessment binder.

A brief overview of the Competencies, with a summary of faculty comments, follows:

Social Responsibility

Social Responsibility remains a difficult domain for faculty to assess, though some faculty report progress in assisting students in thinking through the ethical dimensions of research, scholarly activity, and professional activity in a variety of disciplines and professions. Faculty are committed to considering how they might work with students on understanding this particular competency, both in light of particular disciplinary and professional ethical standards and in terms of larger social implications and ramifications of knowledge production and dissemination.

Knowledge Integration

Many faculty assess this competency primarily in terms of students' ability to integrate skills, information, and content across a specific discipline's sub-disciplines. Attention to *multi-disciplinary* or *inter-disciplinary* possibilities of knowledge integration remain difficult to structure in capstone courses, though some exceptions exist.

Critical Thinking and Effective Communication

These Competencies generally seem to be the most easily assessable, and faculty generally report a high degree of achievement, as students demonstrate their ability to work through and solve a variety of problems and communicate their results in a variety of formats, many of them electronic (including PowerPoint, web sites, and other e-venues).

Increasingly, in terms of Effective Communication, faculty are demonstrating a growing eagerness to work with (electronic) portfolios as a way for students to collect work, reflect on their achievements, and report out their facility with the Baccalaureate Competencies. Faculty in the College of Applied Science, for instance, have been experimenting with e-portfolios as both a rich pedagogical tool and an assessment measure.



Three-Year Cycle Trends: In general, faculty believed that our capstone courses are successful in helping students not only achieve the baccalaureate competences but also demonstrate mastery of discipline-specific skill sets and knowledge content. Many faculty are committed to reexamining on a regular basis the rubrics used to make their assessments in order to fine tune their measures of students' learning. Faculty who have made substantive changes from 2004-2005 to 2006-2007 report being pleased with the changes made. Indeed, the spreadsheets showing comparisons of scores in achievement of the Baccalaureate Competencies demonstrate that students are consistently ranked in the 4-5 score range. Some faculty attribute such consistency to continued innovation in the design, implementation, evaluation, and assessment of capstone courses and experiences. In particular, workshops to discuss capstone strategies and assessment, through venues such as the CET&L, have offered faculty from diverse disciplines the opportunity to learn from one another and encounter pedagogical innovations that may be applicable across disciplines.

Recommendations

After reviewing the data collected over the past three years, as well as consulting with the colleges' Associate Deans, we recommend the following to fine tune our assessment procedures in order to provide more specific feedback to faculty and units towards improving General Education experiences in general and capstone experiences in particular.

1. We had originally intended to ask Department Heads and Associate Deans for their evaluation of the various capstones in their units, but we found that such data might only replicate the data we were already receiving from faculty and capstone instructors. As such, we are reexamining the role of administrators, particularly Associate Deans, in the evaluation, assessment, and feedback loops for General Education. We believe it may be more important to provide unit heads and Associate Deans with instructor/capstone data so that they may work with faculty to improve capstone and General Education instruction. Demonstrating an effective *process* is just as significant as reporting out statistics, and utilizing Associate Deans and unit heads to facilitate reflection and change based on instructor/capstone assessment may be a better use of administrative time, as opposed to asking them for additional data.
2. Building on this recommendation, and given that we now have three years of assessment data, it may be useful to present this information for discussion at a university-level retreat of Associate Deans, representatives from the CET&L, and faculty from the newly formed Academy of Fellows for Teaching and Learning (AFTL). This group could strategize globally and establish university-wide goals to support General Education and capstone instruction.
3. Arising out of such a retreat may be the establishment of a university-level administrative post, a Vice Provost for General Education and Assessment, who could take charge of assessing General Education programs, collaborating with appropriate units (such as the CET&L and Institutional Research), and situating General Education as a high-level academic priority at UC.
4. Finally, while we have done a good job in collecting numerical data, we also need to collect information about the human dimension of General Education. Narratives from



students, faculty, and relevant staff could tell us much about the importance of capstone instruction and experiences, the positioning of the capstone vis-à-vis other General Education and discipline-specific/major course work, and the relevance of capstones to students' academic and career goals.

In general, the following goals should continue to be pursued:

Students should know **up front, at the beginning of each capstone course or experience, what the Baccalaureate Competencies are and that they will be assessed with regard to their work toward achieving the Competencies.** The General Education Director has been working in conjunction with other offices and units (particularly the CET&L) to help promote broad awareness of the Baccalaureate Competencies in *all* General Education courses. It is imperative that the Competencies be clearly defined and that assessment measures be clearly explained at the beginning of each capstone experience, especially given that the capstone as a whole is assessed in relation to students' achievement of the Competencies.

The General Education Director and the Vice President for Research should work closely together to make sure that students undertaking research-intensive projects are not stymied by unnecessarily difficult Institutional Review Board protocols. Some faculty reported a lessening of interest among students in conducting research because of "IRB issues," such as the arcane and convoluted way in which IRB protocols are sometimes discussed.

The General Education Director, in conjunction with the CET&L, should offer ongoing workshops in helping faculty (and staff) work through designing curricula, assignments, and experiences that will foster students' development of the two "tricky" Competencies: social responsibility and knowledge integration. As we experiment broadly with *interdisciplinary capstones* and the development of more complex *experiential and service-learning components within the capstones*, these Competencies should become easier around which to organize pedagogical experiences, and they should also become easier to assess.

Next Steps

Since this round of assessment represents the completion of a three-year cycle, it is imperative that UC consider the merits of the current assessment measures, the feedback loop influencing ongoing development of courses, capstones, and General Education experiences. The establishment of high-level academic administration, provided that it "keeps its ear to the ground" and understands and respects faculty input about capstones and their assessment may be a strong signal to the UC community that General Education is a vital initiative in fostering student learning and success.