

UMBC General Education Committee (GEC)
Subcommittee Review and Recommendations
Biennial Assessment Report approved by GEC (February 13, 2015)
Presented to Council of Deans and UMBC Assessment Committee (March 2, 2015)

Background

The UMBC General Education Committee supports the efforts of the Council of Deans and the UMBC Assessment Committee to promote successful achievement of the institution's general education learning outcomes.

The GEC provides this support in a variety of ways. First, GEC members meet monthly to review new course proposals and existing courses to ensure that faculty have adopted rubrics or other measures to adequately assess student mastery of well-defined general education goals. Second, GEC members work in cooperation with the Director of the Faculty Development Center to educate faculty about general education requirements and appropriate modes of assessment.

Finally, members of the GEC participate in review of departments' biennial assessment of general education. In this context, the GEC's role is to monitor university-wide progress on assessment of general education, to make note of successes, and to draw attention to areas in need of improvement. This report, then, fulfills the GEC responsibility to monitor university-wide general education assessment and to make recommendations aimed at improving the culture of learning at UMBC.

Progress and Success

During the fall of 2014, the Council of Deans presented biennial reports to the Provost and to a representative of the General Education Committee regarding the assessment of general education. Departments conduct biennial reviews of general education in order to assess programmatic success in helping students achieve a series of general functional competencies relevant to each field and discipline. The Deans' reports indicate two notable areas of success. First, the University has achieved an acceptable measure of compliance in terms of assessment of general education. Departments are successfully adapting to a new university culture in which the goal is not simply to evaluate students, but, more importantly, to evaluate the success of the university in fostering learning. Second, there is also evidence that the university is making progress toward a more consistent and uniform approach to assessment in general and, in particular, to the assessment of general education.

The Deans' reports also indicate that at least two notable shifts had taken place in terms of implementation and use of general education assessment. First, a number of departments have

implemented assessment plans that recognize that capstone projects present an opportunity to evaluate the overall program success. Second, in adopting this program-centered perspective—as opposed to a course-by-course view of assessment—a number of departments have begun to re-evaluate their particular use of adjuncts for teaching core courses and engaging in general education assessment.

Areas in Need of Improvement

The Fall 2014 Deans' biennial reports also revealed several areas in need of improvement.

First, although the University has made significant progress on compliance, it seems evident that some departments resist fully embracing assessment as a tool. The University would do well to foster a new culture of assessment. University leaders must take a more active role in defining general education assessment as part of a larger effort to improve student learning. It is a tool to help us ensure that all UMBC graduates have acquired skills and habits of mind that transcend individual courses and disciplines.

Second, and related, while departments and programs are complying with assessment requirements, they need some assistance to identify how best to “close the loop.” Information gathered during assessment measures how well assignments help students achieve general education learning outcomes. If assessment indicates there is a gap in student success, faculty can use this information both for new course development and for making small, measured changes to existing assignments to help improve student learning.

Third, it is evident that departments and programs would still benefit from guidance in understanding the difference between direct and indirect measures of student learning and in understanding how to fully integrate functional competencies into their course learning goals.

Fourth, and finally, the pressure to increase enrollment has had some unintended consequences on general education assessment and on the use of assessment outcomes. While it seems reasonable for faculty to adjust learning outcomes to accommodate more students—including non-majors in any given course—some departments and programs have made changes to curriculum that are more impressionistic than objective. In general, departments, programs, and students will benefit courses are changed in response to assessment information.

Recommendations

Four general recommendations came out of the Fall 2014 Deans' biennial reports to the Provost.

First, and perhaps most importantly, discussion and reporting on assessment has mostly focused on process rather than on data. This is understandable because there has been a learning curve for

faculty and administration alike. However, at this juncture, it is important for Departments and Programs to begin to share what they have discovered about student learning. For example, do assessment results indicate that students are gaining proficiency in oral and written communication and other learning outcomes? Or, does general education assessment demonstrate that students are still struggling to achieve proficiency? Once Departments and Programs identify areas in which students are struggling, they can begin to propose concrete and creative solutions. Further, identifying issues with learning and developing creative responses to those issues will help us identify the most critical needs for campus resources and development.

Second, the Director of the Faculty Development Center and the Chair of the GEC should provide direct assistance and training to help departments understand the terms, the purpose, and the possible outcomes of general education assessment.

Third, each Department or program should create an assessment committee or assign an assessment coordinator to guide his or her colleagues. This will allow expertise to take root across the campus rather than remaining somewhat centralized. This may also help combat the perception that assessment is a top-down requirement.

Fourth, the GEC and the Faculty Development Center should create a digital assessment resource library so that Departments and programs have the opportunity to gain expertise in the subject of assessment and consult a variety of sources when questions arise.

Finally, there is some interest in the creation of a generic template to foster a more consistent, university-wide approach to general education assessment. Although some variety seems necessary and desirable, it may be possible to identify core strategies or organizational approaches that can transcend departmental differences.