

A message from the General Education Committee— (18 Nov 2015)

As the General Education Committee (GEC) looks forward to future rounds of the quadrennial review (QR) of GE courses, it has agreed to open up the opportunity to revise the student learning outcomes associated with GE goals.

Background

The GEC made substantial revisions to the GE curriculum which went into force with the 2012-2013 academic bulletin. It reduced the number of goals associated with the mission, which did not change, from eight to five. (The goals which were removed were not regarded as unimportant but, for the most part, were believed to apply to the undergraduate curriculum as a whole or to be a general university responsibility as part of A-State's commitment to providing a well-rounded undergraduate experience.)

A second piece to the revision of the GE curriculum was the articulation of student learning outcomes (SLOs) for each of the final five GE goals. These SLOs are of critical importance because they are the criteria against which courses are assessed in the QR process. The GEC devoted many meetings to the challenging problem of articulating these SLOs whose formulation was heavily, but of course not exclusively, influenced by representatives of the colleges offering GE courses. In addition, draft efforts on these SLOs were shared with GE-offering departments, amongst others, and feedback was incorporated in the various drafts until the GEC reached a final consensus in spring 2014. The goals and current SLOs are shown [on-line](#).

Inevitably, because this was a new venture for all of us, the SLOs were written in without a full understanding of how they would be interpreted and used for assessment purposes. As the departments and the GEC have gone through the first round of the QR, it has become clear that there may be room for improvement in the language of at least some of the SLOs. As was noted in the GEC's October 2015 call for planning documents for QRII, "The validity of assessment items, that is the correspondence between the assessment question(s) and the designated outcome, was the greatest source of problems in QRI." We elaborated on this point by the following observations:

An instrument that calls for recall of course material is not an assessment of student learning of the GE outcomes. A review of the [goals and outcomes](#) makes clear that students are expected to be able to apply what they have learned in various courses to demonstrate, for example, that they can communicate effectively (by being able to construct and deliver a well-organized, logical, and informative oral or written presentation, accurately documented, that demonstrates proficiency in standard American English) or, to give another example, that they have developed an appreciation of the arts and humanities (by being able to Interpret works of fine arts or literature). An assessment in the area of effective communications that does not require production of a presentation scored on those attributes is not a valid measure of the outcome, nor is an instrument in the arts or humanities which, given the interpretation outcome, does not require students to interpret a work.

While problematic SLOs was not the only landmine in QRI, it was a substantial one, and one the GEC can take the lead on removing. That is why we are prepared to consider revised statements of SLOs. There are ground rules, however,

Ground Rules

1. The GEC is strongly disinclined to consider changes in the number or specification of GE goals.
2. All courses covered by a common goal are assessed by the same outcome(s) and the GEC will only consider a proposal to change the outcome(s) for a given goal if the departments offering the courses in a goal area are unanimous in their support for the revision.
3. For a given goal, there may currently be one or two SLOs. When there are multiple SLOs, each course in a goal area is obliged to be prepared to assess each of the multiple outcomes. While the GEC has directed GE-offering departments to assess only one of multiple SLOs in the first two rounds of the QR, ultimately departments will have to assess all extant SLOs.
4. SLOs must be part of a chain that logically and directly links them to their goal which is also tightly linked to the mission for the GE curriculum. As shown in the 2015-2016 *Undergraduate Bulletin*,

The general education program develops a foundation and motivation for the lifelong pursuit of learning in undergraduate students at Arkansas State University by introducing them to a broad range of essential areas of knowledge that will enable them to think critically and participate ethically in a democratic nation and a global society.

While GE courses introduce students “to a broad range of essential areas of knowledge” so as to develop “a foundation and motivation for the lifelong pursuit of learning,” it does so for a purpose, to “enable them to think critically and participate ethically in a democratic nation and a global society.” When the GEC worked on the development of the various SLOs, it did so with the ultimate purpose of educating students with critical and ethical faculties who could participate in a democratic national and a global society. That end purposes should guide efforts in articulating outcomes appropriate for a particular goal, which, when each of them is taken together, is intended to fulfill the mission of GE curriculum. Writing outcomes which seem to fit the goals but which do so without consideration of the overall mission will not be satisfactory. Arguably, some of the difficulties we have had with assessment measures that did not appropriately tap SLOs arise from a collective failure to diligently focus on these linked elements.

Timing

Setting an appropriate time-frame for adopting revising SLOs is a bit of a puzzle. On the one hand, assessing courses using defective SLOs seriously compromises the integrity of the whole enterprise. That would argue for changing SLOs as quickly as can be done well. On the other hand, assessment is long-term process, one which builds on prior work so as to accumulate knowledge as to the effectiveness of instruction. Accordingly, destabilizing the process by changing outcomes frustrates our ability to compare results from round to round of the QR and measure progress toward fulfilling the GE mission. By one timeline, departments in a goal area would take the time to develop the best possible SLOs which, once approved by the GEC, would serve as assessment criteria for the third and succeeding rounds of the QR but that means those problematic SLOs would continue to be the reference points for QRII assessments. Using another timeline, as soon as departments sharing a goal can receive GEC approval of revised SLOs, they might plan their assessments using these new standards, perhaps even in QRII. The GEC leaves the decision to the departments as to when to commence using revised (and GEC-

approved) SLOs so long as there will be at least two years' worth of comparable assessment data for the QR.

Conclusion

The GEC is offering the opportunity to revise SLOs in the interest of improving our process of assessing GE courses and does so in the hopes that it is making the process easier and better for GE-offering departments. Questions about this opportunity can be raised with college representatives to the committee or can be directed to the panel as a whole by writing to [Ms. Luna Unnold](#) in the Provost's office.

Thank you.