General Education Assessment

Frequently Asked Questions

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Procedural Questions

- **Why are we even doing this?**
  The primary reason why we assess our students’ learning outcomes in general education is so that we can ensure that courses that fulfill the general education requirements are actually providing our students with the learning experience they are supposed to receive from courses in that category. The purpose of general education is to expose students to ideas, information and ways of thinking that come from taking courses in a wide variety of fields. To ensure that we are actually providing our students with these experiences, it is critically important that we have some way of measuring whether our students are meeting expectations in the learning objectives for each general education category. That is where assessment comes in. The other reason we do this is because both SUNY and our accrediting agency, the Middle States Commission on Higher Education, require us to. If we lose our accreditation, we would not be eligible to participate in federal student aid programs that are so vitally important to many of our students.

- **My department asked me to teach this course, and I wasn’t aware that it met general education requirements—what do I do?**
  We are only contacting instructors of record teaching courses that have been approved for this general education category. You can check for yourself using UAlbany’s Gen Ed lookup tool here: [http://www.albany.edu/generaleducation/course_lookup.php](http://www.albany.edu/generaleducation/course_lookup.php). Any course that offers general education credit must meet the standards for that category (you can check at [www.albany.edu/gened](http://www.albany.edu/gened) for more on UAlbany’s general education system in general, and [http://www.albany.edu/generaleducation/general-education-categories.php](http://www.albany.edu/generaleducation/general-education-categories.php) for the learning objectives for individual categories). It is not possible to change the Gen Ed status of a course from semester to semester (or vary it from instructor to instructor).

- **My course doesn’t cover all the learning objectives for the general education category. Can I just assess the objectives my class does cover?**
  With the exception of Humanities and Arts, all general education courses are required to cover all learning objectives for their categories. It is likely that the course was first submitted for approval as a general education course by a different instructor, but since it is still on the books as a general education course, your students are meeting the general education requirement, so it needs to cover all the leaning objectives. The alternative is to meet with other faculty in your department and, if all are agreed, petition to have the course removed from the list of courses that meet general education guidelines for a particular category.

- **How often will I have to participate in Gen Ed Assessment?**
  General Education categories are assessed on a five-year cycle, so not for at least another five years. If your class (or other classes you teach) meet more than one general education requirement, you might get sampled for those categories as well.

- **How did I get picked for the sample?**
  Because we only assess each general education category once every five years, we need to select a sample that is large and representative of the fields and types of courses that comprise this category.
In practice, we use a stratified random sampling technique in which we sort all classes in the category for the semester of the assessment by department, and choose roughly every second or third course. As needed, we make minor adjustments to ensure that no instructor is chosen twice, and that the sample is representative of all departments teaching courses that meet this General Education category.

- **I am a grad student/adjunct/visitor/part-time faculty member. Why was I sampled, and am I expected to participate?**
  Yes, you are expected to participate — in fact, your responses are especially important! Because we only assess each general education category once every five years, we need to select a sample that is large and representative of the fields and types of courses that comprise this category, as well as the classifications of instructors who teach them. So many General Education courses are taught by non-tenure-track instructors that if were to exclude your group and others from the assessment, our assessment would not be a valid one. If you need assistance with your assessment, you can contact our assessment office staff (Joel Bloom/jbloom@albany.edu and Steven Doellefeld/sdoellefeld@albany.edu) as well as your own department chair, undergraduate director, or assessment coordinator for assistance. If you are a graduate student, participation in a student learning outcomes assessment is something you can put on your c.v., and can be an important part of your teaching portfolio that you present to prospective employers. If you are planning on making a career as a professor, this will also be a great teaching opportunity, as you will almost certainly be expected to engage in various types of assessment activities in your new position.

**Questions on Beginning-of-Term Assessment Components**

- **How do I choose the right assessment tool for each learning objective?**
  At UAlbany we use course-based assessment rather than a top-down model in which specific assignments are used for assessment in all classes. This means that you have the freedom to think of all the pieces of student work you will see throughout the term and choose which parts of which pieces of work you think will provide the best measure of student performance on each learning objective. So you can look through the list of “assessment tools” in the second column of the assessment form and see, first, which ones you will be using, and second, which ones work for particular learning objectives.

- **The assessment form lists a lot of different “assessment tools” for each learning objective. Do I have to use all of them?**
  Not at all. In fact, if you have one assessment tool that you feel very closely fits with a learning objective, you can use that by itself to assess that objective. Or, if you prefer, you can use a combination of different kinds of tools, but often one is enough.

- **If there is just one assessment form, why do we have to fill different parts of it out at two different times? Can’t I just fill out the whole thing at the end of the term when I have my results?**
  We used to have two separate forms, but combined them so that you can more clearly see how the portions of the form you complete at the beginning of the term (columns 2-4) line up with the portions of the form you complete at the end of the term (columns 5-6). The reason it’s important to complete columns 2-4 early in the term is this: when you select your assessment tools to be used for each learning objective in advance, it is then very easy while you are grading them to give each item a separate score just for the learning objective, apart from the grade you will assign it for your own purposes. If you wait until the end of the term, after you’ve completed your regular grading and handed most of the students’ work back, you won’t be able to do that.
Questions on End-of-Term Assessment Components

- **I see under the “results” column that we are supposed to put in numbers of students who “exceeded,” “met,” “approached,” or “did not meet” each learning objective. The instructions mention letter grades; does that mean I can just use course grades here?**

  No. Sorry, but even if the course grade assessed nothing but the learning objectives for this general education category, using the course grade alone would not tell you how your students are doing with each of the learning objectives separately. And in reality, your course grade will represent an assessment of many areas of skill, knowledge, attendance and participation that have nothing to do with the general education learning objectives. The letter grades are provided by SUNY as a guideline for what is equivalent to “exceeds,” “meets,” etc., for the parts of relevant tests or assignments you choose to use to assess each learning objective. See below for some additional ideas.

- **OK, so I have decided which “assessment tools” I am going to use for each learning objective. When I’m completing the “results” column do I just use the grades I gave them for those assignments?**

  Usually not. Remember that the grades you assign – even for a particular assignment – are usually based on many factors other than the general education learning objective; that’s why it is so important to select your assessment tools in advance and assess them specifically for the relevant learning objective(s) when you are evaluating them. On occasion, you might have a particular quiz or essay exam on a test, or some other assignment, that really does match up nearly perfectly with a learning objective. In cases like that, of course you can just use the grade. **The point is that for each learning objective you should be able to assign each student a score on the “did not meet” to “exceeded” scale that fairly precisely matches that student’s performance only for that objective.**

  Usually, however, even if you are using an assignment or test for only one objective, you should still give it a score strictly for the learning objective rather than simply using the grade, which nearly always is based on many components in addition to the general education learning objective.

- **I am using a term paper to assess three learning objectives. Can I just use the paper grade for all three?**

  No, since that would not be separately assessing student performance on each of the objectives. Term papers are wonderful assessment tools, and often do cover more than one learning objective, but for them to provide a valid assessment of a learning objective, you would need to give each student paper a separate assessment score for each of the learning objectives being assessed. This is actually very easy to do if you do it while you are grading the papers; it’s harder to do if you go through the papers later; it is impossible to do after you have handed the papers back.

- **My class has over 100 students in it, and unfortunately I have to use a lot of Scantron tests. How can I possibly assess my class?**

  Actually, Scantron tests can lend themselves very well to assessment. The trick is to go through each test and select items that are closely aligned with the learning objectives. The best test items for these purposes would be ones that clearly get at one, and only one, learning objective. For example, you might choose 10 items on multiple choice tests to assess one objective. By this guideline, students who got 9 or 10 correct have exceeded expectations; those with 7 or 8 have met expectations, those with 6 have approached expectations, and those with 5 or fewer correct have not met expectations (those cutoffs could change if the test is graded on a curve). In most cases, somewhere between 5 and 10 items are sufficient to provide a valid assessment of a particular learning objective. In order to be able to do this, you will need to obtain the raw student-level data files for each test, which is one of the options when you are requesting the test. For precise instructions on how to go about this, and information on ways in which the assessment office can assist you, please contact Joel Bloom at jbloom@albany.edu.