General Education Assessment
Humanities
Spring 2013

The University at Albany, SUNY

Assessment Report

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Institutional Research, Planning & Effectiveness

August, 2013
General Education Assessment  
Spring 2013

Categories Assessed: Arts, Humanities

Background  
In Spring, 2013 the University at Albany assessed the degree to which students were achieving student learning objectives in Arts and Humanities. As with previous assessments the sample was chosen to be generally representative of the categories rather than fully random. The Humanities sample consisted of 20 classes from 7 different departments, with N=939 (41% of the population). Enrollments in these courses ranged from 19 to 128. All but one of the courses sampled was within the College of Arts and Sciences.

Of the 20 classes sampled, 12 instructors submitted correctly completed forms at the end of the semester. An additional 5 instructors submitted forms that proved unusable due to incompleteness or other reasons. One instructor declined to fill out the forms due to pending retirement, noting that it was likely the last time the course would be taught. Two instructors did not respond to the survey, despite multiple attempts to contact them. Data were collected from a student N of 574, which is 61% of the sample, and 27% of the population. While the N is smaller in this assessment, it represents a larger percentage of the population of students taking courses meeting this General Education requirement.

The instructor participation rate on this administration of the General Education assessment was better in both categories than it has historically been. We believe this is attributable to 2 factors: 1) Better communication from IRPE, including earlier notification of selection for the sample, and a pre-notification of all instructors in the two categories by the Vice Provost for Undergraduate Education and the Associate Dean for General Education; and 2) Regular and repeated communication from the Dean’s Office in the College of Arts and Sciences to instructors who were selected to be part of the sample. Participating instructors mapped their courses to specific learning objectives, reflected on assessment results, and discussed how their findings would influence their course design and pedagogy for these courses in future semesters. This is exactly what we hoped the assessment process would produce. Appendix B illustrates these activities and reflections.

Course Embedded Assessment  
Seventeen of twenty instructors sampled responded, though five provided data that was either incomplete or was not useable. Total enrollment in courses meeting this General Education category was 2,125 students. The sample consisted of 939 students, and the number of students assessed is 574 (61% of sample, 27% of the population). Although overall enrollment in courses

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1 Data were received from one of these two instructors after this report had been completed, and are not reflected in these results, though they are generally representative of the findings of this report.
meeting this category was lower in 2013 than in 2009 (by 131 students), the N of the sample and percentage of students assessed is slightly higher.

Assessment results from this category indicate that the majority of students “Exceeded” or “Met” expectations. As shown in the composite graph below, as well as graphs for each of the individual learning objectives on the following pages, large majorities of students were reported to have either met or exceeded each of the four learning objectives, ranging from a low of 70% for objective 1 to a high of 81% for objective 2. It is also important to note that the percentage of students who “Did not meet” the requirements of the General Education learning objective was higher for all five learning objectives in 2013 than it was in 2009 or 2006. Please see the section entitled “Comparison to 2006 & 2009 results”, beginning on page 5, for more information.

Figure 1: Humanities Learning Objective 1
2) Humanities courses will enable students to demonstrate an understanding of the continuing relevance of the objects of study to the present and to the world outside the university.

3) Humanities courses will enable students to demonstrate an ability to employ the terms and understand the conventions particular to the discipline.
Comparison to 2006 & 2009 results:
In comparison to the 2009 assessment of this category, in two of the learning objectives (4 and 5) we see improvements in the percentage of students exceeding the objectives, including a 15 percentage point increase in category #5 (from 22% in 2009 to 37% in 2013). When “Exceeded” and “Met” are combined, we see drops in all categories from 2009 to 2013. We offer no speculation to explain this drop, other than to point out that the General Education Assessment forms have been revised since the 2009 assessment, and are now easier to understand and complete, perhaps leading to tighter assessments by instructors.
In comparing 2013 data to 2009 and 2006 data in each of the five Learning Objectives individually (figures 8-12 on the following pages), no discernible patterns emerge that would explain the differences in student performance.

**Figure 7:** “Exceeded” and “Met” 2006, 2009, 2013, by Learning Objective

**Figure 8:** Learning Objective 1, 2006, 2009, 2013

1) **Humanities courses will enable students to demonstrate an understanding of the objects of study as expressions of the cultural contexts of the people who created them.**

**Figure 8:** Learning Objective 1, 2006, 2009, 2013
2) Humanities courses will enable students to demonstrate an understanding of the continuing relevance of the objects of study to the present and to the world outside the university.

3) Humanities courses will enable students to demonstrate an ability to employ the terms and understand the conventions particular to the discipline.

Figure 9: Learning Objective 2, 2006, 2009, 2013

Figure 10: Learning Objective 3, 2006, 2009, 2013
4) Humanities courses will enable students to demonstrate an ability to analyze and assess the strengths and weaknesses of ideas and positions along with reasons or arguments that can be given against them.

5) Humanities courses will enable students to demonstrate an understanding of the nature of texts, artifacts, ideas, or discourse of the discipline and of the assumptions that underlie this understanding, including those relating to issues of tradition and...
Inclusion of graduate student and contingent faculty

Since the Spring 2009, a concerted effort has been made to include graduate student instructors, contingent faculty (typically under the title of “Lecturer”), and professional faculty teaching on a part time basis as part of the General Education Assessment sample. As shown in Figure 13, below, graduate student instructors and contingent faculty in particular teach a disproportionate percentage of the introductory undergraduate courses that meet the General Education requirements in this category. In fact, in Spring 2013, only 31% (17 of 54) of the courses meeting the Humanities general education requirement were taught by tenured or tenure track faculty. While this result is not unexpected, it does serve to demonstrate why any valid assessment in this category would need to require non-tenure-related faculty.

Figure 13: All Spring 2013 Humanities General Education courses by instructor rank
Time required to complete assessment

The General Education forms that instructors are asked to complete record the length of time it took them to prepare data for and complete the beginning and end of semester assessment forms (see Figure 14 and Appendix C). The average time for the reported preparation of the data and the completion of both forms was 136 minutes (2 hours and 16 minutes). On average the 14 instructors who completed the beginning of semester form and included a response to this question indicated that it took a little more than an hour to complete. When the one outlier was removed from the average, the time to complete the form dropped to 48 minutes. The preparation and input of results for the end of semester form was about 70 minutes with no glaring outliers.

![Figure 14: Time to complete General Education Assessment forms, in minutes.](image)

**Recommendations:**

1) IRPE – While IRPE has made strong inroads towards improving the participation rate of faculty who have been sampled as part of the General Education Assessment process, improvements can still be made. In particular, we could do a better job of providing guidance to faculty to fill out the assessment forms correctly, including how to provide useable data. To that end, we are now developing a brief tutorial as well as other instruction sheets to clarify the process and better capture assessment data on the forms.
2) **Response rate:** While the response rate from the sample was improved with this administration of General Education assessment, it came with a high human capital expenditure. The Director of Assessment, along with the Assistant Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences exerted tremendous time and energy sending out reminders and encouragement to sampled instructors. We need to work more diligently towards making assessment part of the expected culture at the University at Albany. Perhaps ITLAL can assist in this regard.

3) **Graduate student/contingent faculty** - We urge deans and department chairs to continue to make clear to graduate student instructors, contingent and part time faculty, that General Education Assessment is included as part of their contractual responsibilities of teaching and assessment, and if selected for the sample, they are expected to participate without additional remuneration.
Appendix A: Student Learning Objectives – Humanities

Depending on the discipline, humanities courses will enable students to demonstrate some or all of the following:

1. an understanding of the objects of study as expressions of the cultural contexts of the people who created them;
2. an understanding of the continuing relevance of the objects of study to the present and to the world outside the university;
3. an ability to employ the terms and understand the conventions particular to the discipline;
4. an ability to analyze and assess the strengths and weaknesses of ideas and positions along with the reasons or arguments that can be given for and against them;
5. an understanding of the nature of the texts, artifacts, ideas, or discourse of the discipline and of the assumptions that underlie this understanding, including those relating to issues of tradition and canon.
## Appendix B: End of Semester Reflections

This appendix reports instructor reflections on student learning as well as self-reflection on what “worked well” and “didn’t work well”.

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Respondent #</th>
<th>Learning Objective #</th>
<th>Comments</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>19</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>The students who succeeded attended class, engaged in class discussion, paid attention to lecture and took notes in class (as opposed to writing down only what I specifically told them to), and the vast majority of names who did not at least approach expectations had attendance problems, didn’t even bring materials to class, didn’t know important dates, classroom protocols and other items clearly outlined in the syllabus.</td>
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<td>19</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Honestly, if a student don’t “get” this, then s/he wasn’t in class. Aside from everyday analogies and discussions, an entire week was dedicated to analyzing the ways in which themes and motifs from Greek myth continue to impact modern culture. We watched numerous film clips and then discussed these themes and motifs afterward.</td>
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<td>19</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Important terms were highlighted on power points AND written/defined on whiteboard. They were used and reinforced throughout lecture and (re)defined over the course of weeks and months. Short of giving students a cheat sheet or “study guide” (which does nothing to internalize learning, in my opinion), students who could define and apply Greek terms to the literature we read were poor students who didn’t take notes, didn’t review their exams, etc.</td>
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<td>19</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>I have low expectations for this. These are first and second year students I’m asking to do things they’ve probably never done before(analyze literature of another culture – as opposed to reader response analysis, which doesn’t pay attention to context). Therefore, I give them these “answers,” in so much as they exist, and since much of the material is already foreign to them, the trick is more about making them see the foreign point of view rather than the “holes” in said view.</td>
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<td>19</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>This objective pretty much IS the course. The material of every single lecture meeting addressed this on some way. One’s grade in the course directly reflects this: As (16), Bs (26), Cs (14), Ds &amp; Es (12).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>This is a large lecture course, so I cover background material in lecture (powerpoints provided) and assess material covered on three multiple choice exams. My biggest problem in these large courses is attendance. Students who do not attend class do not do well on assignments and even the students who do attend have clearly not done the reading assignment. In future, I will incorporate an attendance sheet and occasional in-class quizzes.</td>
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<tr>
<td>20</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Students paper reflect an understanding of texts and how they apply to modern concepts such as gender or ethics. I encouraged students to bring drafts of their papers to my office, and many did so and were able to improve their final product.</td>
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<tr>
<td>20</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>I only assign primary sources for texts, so students need to attend class and take notes on relevant approaches to myths and analysis of</td>
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literary selections. Attendance proves to be the biggest hurdle for this objective. As I stated above, in the future I will pass around an attendance sheet and give quizzes to encourage more student engagement.

20 5 Multiple choice questions are keyed to various interpretations of texts covered in class.

22 1 1) Stressed cultural contexts in lectures, required students to address cultural contexts in written response to reading assignment, and discussed importance of cultural contexts after lectures.

2) Make more of an effort to call on specific students during class discussions to assess their individual understanding and avoid dominant voices in the group.

22 2 1) Covered question of relevancy in lectures, and, with select texts, pointedly framed questions about contemporary relevancy during class discussions.

2) Small group exercises that require each group to address the question of relevancy of a given text and subsequently share their conclusions, thereby opening a space for class discussion and debate.

22 3 1) Use and explanation of key disciplinary terms during both lectures and class discussions, unpacking of student comments during class discussions, as well as commenting on written reading responses and midterm essay.

2) Required vocabulary quizzes throughout semester.

22 4 1) Examples of textual analysis given during lectures, explanation of given textual analysis given during class discussion, and commentary on given on written reading responses and midterm essay.

2) As my assessment numbers indicate, students were quite strong in this category for this particular class. In the future, one might further stress meetings during office hours to work on individual student needs.

22 5 1) Opening remarks of lectures and class discussions often framed specifically in terms of the classical literary tradition and its assumptions, as well as how to situate a given literary text in such a context.

2) As my assessment numbers indicate, students were strongest in this category for this particular class. Class discussions in this regard were effective.

23 1 Overall, I was pleased with the students’ abilities to take my lectures/hand-outs on the relevant cultural context for a particular work and incorporate it into their reading of a text. I found the group-work particularly useful for having students demonstrate this.

23 3 I found that, for the most part, the cumulative response papers were effective in helping my students begin to understand and execute various conventions of the discipline. I had a number of students whose writing and ability to close read and analyze texts increased over the course of the 5 responses they wrote over the term, culminating in their final paper. Going forward, I might consider incorporating the group work into the response exercises, holding
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<th>Page</th>
<th>Line</th>
<th>Text</th>
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<tr>
<td>23</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>As noted above, I have found the cumulative response papers were particularly effective in preparing students for writing their final paper. Additionally, students’ final response acted as a first draft of their final paper, which we workshopped together.</td>
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<tr>
<td>25</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Class discussions mixed with lecture worked well; visiting the campus library to view “texts” outside the established “literary” field was helpful in their broader understanding; small group work was essential.</td>
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<td>25</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Revisions proved yet again to be an essential tool in helping students grasp course objectives and improve their analytic skills; workshop days set aside for discussing convention and rhetoric in literary studies also allowed most students make great strides in their writing abilities and use of discipline-specific terminology – would do more mini in-class writing exercises/lessons to help those “B” students get closer to becoming “A” students.</td>
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<td>26</td>
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<td>This question makes a number of assumptions that make a ‘straight’ answer next to impossible. As you are well aware our students are intellectually at varying levels of maturity. All of my assignments are designed with a single aim in mind—mainly, to teach students that words and ideas require care and are immensely important. I try to get to know my students and structure my responses and evaluations of them with these own idiosyncrasies in mind. Hence, an international student who is able to parse Melville’s rather intense and verbose prose will be evaluated and encouraged in a way that differs from a student who I have taught in earlier semesters and is emotionally and intellectually ready for more sustained critical discussion and evaluation. Presentations are a chance for students to come to know and see how their peers think and allows me to model in a more public mode sympathetic though critical discussion crucial to their eventual involvement in a public sphere totally lacking in positive models of responsible and rigorous thinking. Here is as good a place as any to inform you that my tardiness here is not on account of carelessness or irresponsibility. I am paid—next to nothing—to work 20 hours a week. Because reading and writing are my vocation I am fairly protective of my time. (As I write I am preparing to make a meal of food I received from a local food pantry.) Because I offer my students total access to me during the term I have not had time to participate in the way I would have liked to. Perhaps in the future you might involve half-time teachers in these sorts of evaluations and in discussions of general education policies more generally so that a more manageable time line could be implemented. Again, with each student it differed widely. In general I think that helping students to achieve starts with a commitment not to ‘check out’ on students. This means to my mind not straying from abstractions or difficult subjects in class discussions and lectures. I meet with all of my students at least 4 times for a conversation about what they are thinking and struggling with in the course. I am a strong believer in feedback so for each assignment I try to write as much as my students have. If I were to teach the course again I would have made them read more—though this is most likely not practical—to lay out a more intense picture of the historical developments which preceded Moby-Dick with a particular focus on the American and French Revolutions.</td>
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1) I think on the side of the learner this is a matter of carefully reading the course materials and taking the time to think about them. The assignment questions are often designed to guide the students through the materials and structure their information intake by focusing on the context of production of the films as well as their historic references and background.

2) Emphasize more on films being fictions (for some students that take them too literally).

1) Because my course is about Latin American film the connection to the world outside of the university is pretty obvious. Showing the relevance is accomplished by drawing links to contemporary issues that the students are familiar with and/or that affect their lives in the U.S. (e.g. migration, labor rights, military intervention…)

2) Update the information when there are relevant new developments (such as new court rulings about human rights violations, the death of important political figures and other news stories that relate to the current topic of discussion).

1) The exchange in the discussion forums was good for learning to “listen” and to respond to the opinions expressed in the course materials and by other students.

2) I feel like students are often not critical enough when they read articles and watch films and take these sources of information for face value. Some also have a hard time to distinguish between what is important and what is not that relevant. I think I will add more written assignments where the students have to respond to or explain parts of another person’s argument and develop their own positions more explicitly.

I think that asking students to give examples of valid arguments in class and discussing them “on the spot” helped this semester. Indeed, I think it would help to do more of this in future versions of the course.

Inviting students to raise objections to arguments in course readings and discussing them helped to keep students engaged with the material. I would incorporate more such activity into future versions of the course.

I occasionally gave a quiz at the start of class that focused on basic comprehension of assigned readings or that invited comparison / contrast with previous readings, which I think motivated students to stay prepared and also got them thinking about how new material fit into the context they were already familiar with. In future versions of the course I would make such quizzes (i.e., with that focus) more of a regular occurrence.

Strategies that helped students achieve the objective included using recent news reports and videos describing relevant events and having students work in groups to research recent developments in particular ethical debates.

Changes I would make would be to include video and/or audio clips (<5 mins) discussing current ethical debates even more (at least one per day) to help structure the day’s discussion.

Strategies that helped students to meet this objective included the short, ungraded exercises that required students to identify
important terms as well as the quiz components that asked for certain definitions.

I would probably incorporate a multiple choice component of some type to help emphasize technical vocabulary retention and provide more background on acceptable argumentative strategies (i.e. go over common fallacies).

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**31**

| 4 | The topic paper assignment and group debate project helped students to engage with multiple sides of an issue. The group project, in particular, allowed them to learn about different perspectives from their peers and allowed them to exercise maintaining a dialogue among equals.

Same as the previous objective, I would try to incorporate more discussion of common fallacies and appropriate argument strategies to further improve students’ abilities at assessing different positions and arguing for their own opinions.

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**35**

| 1 | I teach this as a course in science studies, which means that course texts come from philosophy of science, history of science, and the sociology of science. Insofar as the course has a disciplinary orientation, however, it is from philosophy. To make this accessible to students who have never taken a philosophy class before, the first course reading is explicitly a work in philosophy. I think I’ll probably continue to begin the course this way next time I teach it.

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**35**

| 2 | The use of concrete examples, as in the assignment used for assessment, is crucial to this course. The day on the map analogy was (as it has been in the past) lively and engaging for students.

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**35**

| 4 | In previous iterations of the course, I gave specific short writing assignments rather than having students write on any five of the course readings. The disadvantage of the “any five” approach is that the reading response papers do no give all of the students in class a shared basis for discussion; the flipside is that every reading is likely to be such that some students have prepared especially for it.

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**35**

| 5 | The nature of reasoning is a central theme in the course, and it has been a target of assessment in our internal departmental assessment process. The course text for the unit on reasoning is a guide which I wrote and used for the first time in Fall 2012. I used it for the second time this term. It has been pretty successful, and I’m considering extending it for next time I teach the course.

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**38**

| 5 | I might make more explicit that they are required to use textual evidence from their very first essays and even written answers to group work. Even on the first essay, many students did not use adequate evidence from the texts to back up their arguments. They did better on their revisions and on the second essays, but still seemed a little reticent for some reason to work closely with the actual wording of the arguments in the texts. I also might try harder to make clear that arguments of the sort “well, they couldn’t have known then what we know now” are not particularly useful in philosophy, even if some of the background beliefs of the authors we study seem implausible to them. For instance, I am considering assigning “for and against” writing assignments so they have to think hard about why someone might want to - and have good reasons to - support a view that they think is outdated.
Appendix C: Time to Completion and Comments

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<tr>
<th>Respondent #</th>
<th>Time Complete Form 1 (in minutes)</th>
<th>Time to Complete Form 2 (in minutes)</th>
<th>Comments</th>
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<td>25</td>
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</table>
| 26           |                                   |                                      | Would it not be more practical to have a set of roundtables within departments in order to facilitate more open discussions? Such a practice would then allow for the development of a more dynamic assessment tool, for more flexible ‘bottom-up’ participation, and also allow participants to budget time more adequately. Email is certainly quite difficult due to the increasingly prevalent use of digital communication: on an average week I receive upwards of 100 emails from students, advisors, and various administrative bodies. Additionally, it seems perverse, to say the least, that my word is being taken as objective or indicative of what is happening in the classroom. I appreciate the gesture but it seems to me that having members of the committee in the classroom to assess my work and then converse with me and/or my students about how the University or its agents understands general education at UAlbany would be—in principle— the best and most useful option. I am aware that principles don’t come cheap in an operation this large but it seems to me that if something is worth doing, it ought to be done well. This leads me to a final point: if general education is a priority for this university then those who are doing the teaching—including graduate students and adjuncts—should also be involved in committee work and given a pardon of sorts from full-time teaching to do their committee work. In my understanding, general education aims at the production and instruction of the whole student allowing for the potential emergence of an intellectually autonomous and enlightened (“release from his self-incurred tutelage”) subject prepared for, in the more recent phrase, the ‘challenges’ of the 21st century. If this is the case, then the holism which lies at the base of the very idea of ‘general education’ ought to extend to our assessment of it. We are living in exceedingly perilous times where the very act of education and thinking is discouraged in an almost total way by the environments of everyday life. This was the very reason I wanted to teach the course I did: its success, as I see it, would be something like a meaningful and responsible interruption of a set of habits and practices which encourage the worst in our students. This would be achieved if a student had what I call a ‘rare event’: a shocking and visceral recognition that ideas and words—not just teachers, families or the market— have
POWER over them. This event is best recognized in conversation or a quick moment of practical physiognomy; it only shows up in papers and quizzes if you know how to look for it and thus is outside the scope of this particular venue. The very premise of the ‘rare event’ moves against much of the organizational and structural aspects of this university because it works from an almost axiomatic point: every student is absolutely unique in their needs, abilities, interests, and way of learning. There is no hard and fast way of bringing about such an event, but the event is to my mind crucial to the eventual education of the people who sit in the seats. Hence, I find myself not meeting many of your expectations here though I do hope that you appreciate my comments.

I just wanted to add that I taught in the classroom for two semesters before I switched to the fully online format. Based on that experience, I am under the impression that the above-mentioned learning objectives are met better by the online format. Not only because the audio-visual content of the course lends itself to making use of technology, but also because the students engage on a deeper level with the subject matter and course materials. In the classroom we would have one weekly session and half of the time would be used to watch the films. Watching a film is not necessarily something that requires co-presence and doing it in a darkened lecture center for an extended period of time right after lunch leaves students tired. I think this can be done more conveniently and more efficiently at home. With the online course I have a week with two assignment deadlines for each movie, which means that the students continue to think about the films past the screening date because they are given new information during the second half of the week and I can often observe a learning curve within one week. The format of this assessment form did not really offer room for capturing the interconnections between different assignments and assessment tools. Furthermore, in an online class all students participate regularly in the discussions, something that is hard to accomplish with 100 students in a classroom. In general, I have a much better idea of who does and who does not read the assigned articles (and who just skimmed them or did not understand them very well). Of course something is lost in the virtual space (the direct interaction), but I often feel like I know the students in my online course better, even though I never met them in person. If I had to teach the course in the classroom again, I would integrate Blackboard into the course design and I have to say that I came to enjoy teaching the course even more since I started teaching it online.

I believe there is an unfair burden on courses in political theory for assessment because they are the only courses in Rockefeller College that can qualify as humanities courses. Only two professors regularly teach these courses. Compared to CAS, it
is disproportionately likely that these two people will have to do assessments. Moreover, one of these courses, RPOS 103, is a very large course. The burden is even greater on assessment at the end of term when one has to go through grades for almost 200 students. This creates a strong disincentive to classify these courses as satisfying the Humanities Gen Ed requirement.

| 38 | 60 | 20 |