Assessment of Student Learning in General Education Courses

Assessment starts with the definition of goals for student learning and continues with a process for measuring attainment of each specific goal. Where deficiencies in learning are identified, measures for correcting those deficiencies should be instituted and evaluated for effectiveness.

Student Learning Goals

The General Education Program approved by the Faculty Senate and managed by the General Education Committee contains student learning goals in two forms:
(1) overarching goals that are stated on the General Education home web page
(2) goals associated with the specific areas in which General Education courses are listed

No course would address all goals, nor even necessarily all goals in a given area. However, a course in the Natural Sciences area, for instance, would be expected to address goals in that area, but could also contain a student learning goal related to communication, which is not specifically cited among the Natural Science goals.

The goals are generally stated in a form that identifies what students are expected to know or be able to do as a result of taking a course. The intention is to provide an outcome that can be readily measured. Of course, a student’s experience in General Education courses (and other courses as well) should also change students’ attitudes and habits of mind, but those are much more difficult to measure. It is our goal that the course-embedded assessments in General Education courses will address the former concerns. The University Assessment Council will make efforts to address the more subtle changes that probably occur gradually over a student’s college career.

Assessment Procedures

Assessment of attainment of the General Education goals should take place within the context of the assignments that are given to students in the course. But simply citing the course letter grades received by the students is rarely an effective assessment of the General Education goals. Letter grades are derived from performance on a conglomerate of assignments. Effective assessment defines which assignments, or which parts of a larger assignment, give direct information about the attainment of a particular learning goal. If the goal is for students to develop the ability to use deductive reasoning within the context of the subject matter of the course, then surely only some questions on an exam, or some responses to writing assignments, actually could be used to measure whether students can apply deductive reasoning.

Since General Education courses range from small sections of 20 to very large sections approaching 1000, the assessment methods that are practical to carry out will vary. The General Education Committee is not necessarily asking you to devise new methods of assessment. You probably already know what is practical and effective in the context of your course. What you are being asked to do, however, is to think carefully about what
questions on a final exam, or what writing tasks, or what other assignments, specifically address each individual learning goal, and break out those responses for separate evaluation. If the goal is relatively specific, such as the example above about using deductive reasoning in the context of the subject matter, the evaluation of performance may be straightforward. With goals such as effective communication, best practice dictates that you use a carefully devised set of criteria (often called a rubric) for evaluating writing, speaking, visual expression, etc. The literature on general education assessment is very large, but here are some links to very useful web sites (http://senate.lsu.edu/GenEd/rubrics.html). Many people on campus have thought carefully about these kinds of evaluations, and some sample rubrics are also posted. The central location on campus for helpful information is the Center for Assessment and Evaluation. Give them a call (8-1145), and they can probably refer you to someone who can be helpful.

Assessment Reports

Every three years, each department will be asked to provide to the University Assessment Council a report that evaluates the effectiveness of the department’s General Education courses in meeting the goals stated in their proposals for listing those courses. The report should indicate what assessment procedures were used, what results were found, and how the department interprets those results in terms of the effectiveness of their General Education courses – specifically their effectiveness in meeting General Education student learning goals. Where deficiencies are found, plans for improvement should be suggested. These reports will be similar to those that the department has submitted to the LSU Assessment Matrix describing assessment of learning outcomes for each degree program. In the Matrix they are called “Biennial Reports,” and they can be accessed from your PAWS desktop through a link under “Planning Resources.”