

**Report and Recommendations**

**General Education Assessment Task Force**

**2003-2004**

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## Introduction

The Task Force was initially charged in the spring of 2003 to evaluate the efficacy of Academic Profile, a nationally-normed general education test used to assess NSU's General Education Program. At its initial planning session, the Task Force recognized that, before it could determine the usefulness of Academic Profile, it had to review the stated philosophy and goals of the General Education Program. It chose to begin with the 1995 University Core Curriculum Task Force Report because the 1995 report continues to stand as the most developed statement of the philosophy, goals, and outcomes of NSU's General Education Program. After a number of initial meetings, during which task force members reviewed the 1995 Report, members agreed on the following plan of action:

- (1) To evaluate the current philosophy, student learning outcomes, and competencies of NSU's core curriculum;
- (2) To research and to evaluate external instruments of assessment, such as Academic Profile and C.A.A.P., in terms of the goals of the NSU's General Education Program;
- (3) To recommend best practices in assessment of the General Education Program.

The Task Force used the assessment terminology developed by Peter Ewell and later adopted by the AACU's *Project on Accreditation and Assessment* to ensure that members shared a common language for productive discussion:

<p><i>Outcome</i> – something that happens to an individual student as a result of attendance at a higher education institution</p> <p><i>Learning</i> – particular levels of knowledge, skills, and abilities that a student has attained at the end of engagement in a particular set of collegiate experiences</p> <p><i>Knowledge</i> – particular areas of disciplinary or professional content that students can recall, relate, and appropriately deploy</p> <p><i>Skills</i> – the learned capacity to do something</p> <p><i>Attitudinal outcomes</i> – changes in beliefs or development of certain values</p> <p><i>Abilities</i> – the integration of knowledge, skills, and attitudes in complex ways that require multiple elements of learning</p> <p><i>Competencies</i> – the specific levels of performance that students are expected to master</p>
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## **Recommendations for Improvement of General Education Assessment**

The following recommendations assume that the GEAC, the General Education Assessment Committee, a permanent academic committee, will be formed and in operation by the fall of 2004.

### **I. General Education Philosophy and Student Learning Outcomes**

The 1995 General Education Report, the result of active research and intensive dialogue among campus constituencies, stands as a model for the kind of campus-wide commitment and collaboration necessary to the continued improvement of general education at Nicholls. The Task Force recommends that the philosophy of general education articulated in the 1995 document and re-emphasized in the University's Strategic Plan continue to serve as the foundation for the core curriculum. Expansion of its major points may now be in order to ensure that the General Education Program continues to be aligned with all programs of study and with the University's overall mission statement. A General Education mission statement, a description of goals and student learning outcomes, and a clear articulation of the purpose and value of general education should be disseminated through appropriate channels, such as the Nicholls web site, the bulletin, and advising materials to increase campus awareness of the importance of general education.

The University's Core Curriculum Student Learning Outcomes need to be revised for greater clarity, for logical distinction, and, given the necessity of having a program that is organic and responsive to change, for timeliness. Because effective assessment demands clear goals and outcomes linked to the core requirements, the Task Force puts forward the following proposed learning outcomes and revised general education schema. **The following proposal is meant to be used as a working document for the GEAC.**

#### **A. PROPOSED GENERAL EDUCATION STUDENT LEARNING OUTCOMES**

NSU's core curriculum endeavors to develop abilities, skills, knowledge, and habits of mind essential to the liberally educated individual and transferable to any major or program. The following student learning outcomes with defining competencies are developed through the General Education core curriculum. They are then fostered by study in the major or program.

##### **Reading Comprehension**

**NSU college graduates should be able to read critically and purposefully with the ability to identify purpose and elements of significant content.**

[Students should be able to identify and summarize the main ideas of a text, to identify supporting evidence, and to identify both stated and implied ideas. They should be able

to recognize biases and assumptions of the writer, as well as to make logical assumptions concerning the context and implied audience of the text.]

### **Effective Communication**

**NSU college graduates should be able to effectively use the English language, writing and speaking with clarity, coherence, and persuasiveness.**

[Students should be able to use standard diction, grammar, and mechanics of American English and to exercise fundamental writing strategies such as invention, drafting, revising, editing, and use of primary and secondary sources. As effective communicators, they should be able to adapt writing and speaking to specific purposes (argument, exposition, reporting) and to specific contexts and audiences. Effective communication must involve the ability to actively listen, to critically reflect, and to respond appropriately both interpersonally and in groups.]

### **Reasoning and Independent Thought**

**NSU college graduates should be able to think critically, creatively, and independently.**

[Effective reasoning or critical thinking involves the ability to recognize the difference among facts, inferences, assumptions, and opinions; to analyze, synthesize, and evaluate information so as to respond thoughtfully; and to solve problems through the generation and reasoned organization of ideas into coherent and meaningful arguments. Students should also be able to make informed judgments of the arguments of others based on the principles of logic and to value the process of reflecting and evaluating their own critical thinking.]

### **Scientific Understanding**

**NSU college graduates should be able to comprehend and to apply methods of scientific inquiry.**

[Scientific understanding is the ability to differentiate among facts, laws, hypotheses and theories, to understand how hypotheses are developed and tested to effect logical conclusions, and to evaluate scientific arguments and the evidence upon which they are based. Given a simple problem or question, students should be able to formulate a hypothesis and design a valid experiment to test it.]

### **Quantitative Reasoning**

**NSU graduates should be able to comprehend and to use quantitative concepts and methods to interpret and to critically evaluate data and to effectively problem-solve in a variety of contexts demanding quantitative literacy.**

[Through quantitative reasoning, students should be able to problem-solve using mathematical, statistical, or logical analysis, to interpret, evaluate, and to communicate quantitative information (i.e., graphs, tables, units of measurement, scales, distributions), to understand the terms and symbols used to present and to analyze data, and to generate and apply conclusions based upon pattern recognition.]

### **Information Technology Literacy**

**NSU graduates should be able to employ current information technology literacy which facilitates learning and critical inquiry.**

[Information technology literacy is the ability to identify required information, to access it effectively and efficiently, to evaluate it critically, and to utilize it responsibly and ethically. Students should be able to use standard software applications such as word-processing and spread-sheet programs and should be able to electronically store, retrieve, and transfer information.]

### **Personal Values, Ethics, and Social Responsibility**

**NSU graduates should be able to analyze the relationship of personal, societal, and cultural values and ethics in a diverse world so that they are able to articulate their own values in relation to alternate value systems, to understand the ethical consequences of their actions on self and others, and to appreciate the importance of civic engagement and the application of their talents and industry to the betterment of their communities and their world.**

[Personal Values, ethics, and social responsibility are developed and refined through exposure to and analysis of multiple perspectives. Students should be able to compare and contrast different historical and cultural perspectives and belief systems, with an appreciation for the importance of the foundations upon which resolution of ethical dilemmas confronted by individuals and diverse communications might be possible.]

### **International and Cultural Awareness and Understanding**

*[Chair's Note: The task force originally collapsed the "Cultural Awareness" outcome into the "Personal Values, Ethics, and Social Responsibility" outcome. However, now that the BOR is mandating a new International Education component for all State General Education, the Task Force felt that it might be best for the General Education Assessment Committee to review this mandate and to work with Courses and Curricula in defining this outcome.]*

## **B. Student Learning Outcomes and the Core Curriculum**

The task force recommends that the relations between the goals of the General Education program and required Gen Ed courses be made clearer through classification of required coursework into two categories: (a) **Core Proficiencies**—basic skill courses in writing,

mathematics, computer literacy, and oral communication; (b) **Breadth of Knowledge Areas** that guarantee a variety of exposure to areas of knowledge and modes of inquiry in the humanities and fine arts, the social and behavioral sciences, and the natural sciences.

[In the following sample, the Task Force has made no attempt to change the General Education Requirements, although the computer literacy and oral communication requirements currently not listed as general education requirements but as university requirements have been included.]

## **GENERAL EDUCATION REQUIREMENTS**

### **Core Proficiencies**

**These requirements ensure that students attain a basic proficiency in writing, speaking, mathematics, and computer use and information management.**

**ENGLISH COMPOSITION:** From ENGL 101, 102 or ENGL 111, 112. Each student shall fulfill English competency requirements by earning a *C* or better in 102.

**MATHEMATICS:** From MATH 101 and a mathematics course specified by the major/minor/concentration/certification. Each student shall fulfill mathematics competency requirements by earning a *C* or better in 101 or by earning credit in calculus.

**WRITING-INTENSIVE COURSE:** From ENGL 264, 266, 310, 366, 368, 468, BSAD 310, MACO 251 as specified by the major/minor/concentration/ certification. These courses teach effective writing within a discipline, with primary emphasis on the further development of essential writing and reasoning skills necessary for success in students' academic, personal, and professional lives.

**Computer literacy and oral communication competencies** to be specified by each department from the list of approved courses. Approved computer literacy courses: CMPS 101, 106, 120, 200; EDUC 251; MNTC 110; MACO 322 or MACO 364, and 365 and 366; OIS 200. Approved oral communication courses: ART 251; ENGL 304; FACS 262; NURS 440; SPCH 101 or 105, SPCH 363.

### **Breadth of Knowledge Requirements**

The following distribution areas allow students to choose courses offered for general education by departments throughout the University. They are meant to guarantee a variety of exposure to areas of knowledge and modes of inquiry in the humanities and fine arts, the social and behavioral sciences, and the natural sciences, as well as to continue to develop the general education outcomes.

**Humanities and the Fine Arts** comprise the areas of intellectual and aesthetic endeavors that seek to define what it means to be human through the study, appreciation, and evaluation of the artistic, philosophical, and historical expressions of other human beings. Such investigation must involve a historical understanding of how the past has shaped human culture and experience.

Students choose from one of the following FINE ARTS courses: ART 110 or 111, 280, APPLIED ART, ART HISTORY, MUS 105 or 107, 307, 319, 320, 341, APPLIED MUSIC, SPCH 300 as specified by the major/minor/concentration/certification.

Students choose from one of the following HUMANITIES: HIST 101, 102 or HIST 105, 106 or HIST 150, 151 and English Literature at the 200-level or above as specified by the major/minor/concentration/certification.

**Natural Sciences** encompass the study of nature and the physical world. Disciplines include the biological sciences and the physical sciences. From these courses, students should understand the currently accepted fundamental ideas in the natural sciences and how these ideas have evolved over time. They should be able to comprehend and evaluate science-related information based on experimental evidence and in the context of currently accepted theories, and they should become more aware of the effects of scientific development on human history, society, and the natural environment.

Students choose from a two semester sequence in either the area of the biological or the physical sciences as specified by the major/minor/concentration/certification. **Biological** sciences include biology; **sequences** include BIOL 105,106; 105, 108; 114, 116; 155, 156. **Physical** sciences include astronomy, chemistry, geology, physical science, or physics; **sequences** include CHEM 101, 102; 101, 208; 105, 106; 221, 222. GEOL 101, 102; 211, 213. PHSC 101, 102; 101, 103; 102, 103. PHYS 101, 102; 201, 202

Students also choose from a natural science course in an area (biological or physical) other than that selected for the sequence above as specified by the major/minor/concentration/certification.

**Social and Behavioral Sciences** involve the study of society and the behavior of its members. Disciplines include economics, geography, government, psychology and sociology. From these courses, students should be able to understand the relation of the individual to society in terms of the influences of social structures and institutions, as well as economic conditions, on identity and behavior. They should also be able to identify the major concepts and methods used by the social and behavioral sciences to investigate, to analyze, and to predict human behavior within social, economic, and political contexts.

Students choose **two** of the following disciplines: economics, geography, government, psychology, or sociology (Three hours of which must be at sophomore level or above as specified by the major/minor/concentration/certification).

## **II. General Education Assessment**

Although NSU has conducted annual university-level assessment for several years through the Academic Profile test, assessment needs to be perceived by both faculty and student as an ongoing rather than episodic process. From its study of best practices in general education assessment, the task force recommends that general education assessment at Nicholls become a more multi-dimensional and collaborative process that effectively “closes the loop” between data and improvement--in other words, that responds to assessment results through improvement of those learning experiences that lead to the General Education Learning Outcomes.

Once the GEAC is formed, it should

1. Develop multiple assessment strategies—external and internal, qualitative and quantitative—to generate a variety of data to assist faculty and administrators to help improve student learning;
2. Use both formative and summative evaluations to allow for a deeper understanding of how and when our students are learning;
3. Begin with the core curriculum but also continue assessment of student outcomes through the major or program assessment and accreditation structures already in place;
4. Guide core curriculum improvements initiated by faculty and developed from assessment results;
5. Document connections between assessment data and improvements to instruction and courses;
6. Guide core curriculum improvements developed from assessment results;
7. Promote campus-wide awareness of the mission and goals of the Nicholls General Education program.

### **Recommendations for Assessment at the University Level**

#### **Academic Profile and C.A.A.P.**

After comparison of Academic Profile and C.A.A.P., the Task Force recommends that NSU continue to use Academic Profile as its primary external assessment instrument. Initially, the Task Force was interested in C.A.A.P. because of its connection to the A.C.T. However, after review of the data, the Task Force learned that such a tie-in could

be easily produced with Academic Profile results. If over the last few years assessment through Academic Profile has not been optimally effective, the fault lies not in the instrument itself but in not systematically using the results to improve student learning—in other words, "closing the loop." The Task Force is confident that, with improved procedures for assessment coordinated by GEAC, the Academic Profile test will prove useful. The Task Force does recommend, however, that the longer version of the test be given under conditions that will encourage students to do well on the test. (The task force has collected published material on ways of improving student motivation. For example, an annual Assessment Day might be the right context for the Academic Profile.)

The GEAC should coordinate use of and response to Academic Profile test results by guiding the process of meaningful response of departmental assessment coordinators to data.

### **Assessment Strategies at the Departmental and Course Level**

The following assessment strategies have been successful at many universities and depend for their success upon general education assessment committees with strong faculty representation and participation.

#### **A. Course-embedded assessment and course audits**

The GEAC must work closely with faculty from foundational areas of general education to develop the rubrics for evaluating competencies. Departmental assessment coordinators and/or committees should review and respond to the proposed outcomes and competencies described above to reach a consensus. Once consensus is reached, all faculty teaching general education courses should include on their syllabi the general education outcomes met by their courses. Faculty need to be active participants in helping students to become aware of how courses fulfill Gen Ed goals. Through the course audit process and through course-embedded assessments, faculty will be able to evaluate how the general education outcomes are met by their courses, how course requirements can be utilized as part of the assessment process, and how best to improve student learning from their findings.

##### **1. Course Audits (bi-annual review of individual areas):**

The GEAC, in collaboration with Gen Ed faculty, will develop General Education Course Audit forms to be used by faculty to analyze to what extent their course fulfills general education outcomes. After each faculty member completes a course audit, all faculty members teaching the course meet to review their analyses and to come to consensus concerning areas needing improvement. A final course audit representing the faculty's findings and planned improvements is then submitted to the GEAC who will review the reports and make its recommendations.

## 2. Course-embedded Assessments and TracDAT:

With the guidance of the GEAC, Gen Ed faculty determine how best to assess student learning in their courses through course-embedded elements: for example, in history, evaluation by history faculty of a common exam question across sections of a course; in English, holistic grading of sample papers drawn from sections of a course. Faculty meet to discuss results and to determine actions necessary to address problems. An annual report of findings and planned improvements is made to the GEAC. The Task Force also recommends that the GEAC investigate the use of TracDAT assessment software.

### **B. Assessment at the Major or Program Level:**

The General Education Program does more than prepare students for entry into their major or program; it is to work collaboratively with the major or program to ensure that NSU graduates have not only mastered the specific content of the degree program or major chosen but also are able to draw upon and integrate the knowledge and skills developed by the core curriculum into their chosen area of study. Faculty and students need to recognize that the General Education Student Learning Outcomes are transferable and integrated into the chosen program of study.

Assessment of the General Education Program must, therefore, include assessment of how well the major or program fosters the General Education Learning Outcomes. All majors and programs should be able to show continuing development of the following outcomes—Reading Comprehension, Effective Communication, Information Technology Literacy, Cultural Awareness, and Personal Values, Ethics, and Social Responsibility.

Every major or program of study should require further development of *one or more* of the higher-order reasoning skills *appropriate to the specific major or program*—Reasoning and Independent Thought, Quantitative reasoning, and/or Scientific Reasoning.

The most efficient method of assessment at this level occurs through use of the data already generated through departmental assessment of the major (including any assessment arising out of discipline- accrediting bodies). One important focus of assessment should be the senior-level capstone course or experience where students demonstrate their acquisition of knowledge and skills throughout their undergraduate career. The faculty responsible for the capstone course will determine how the student learning outcomes are met in the course and report to the GEAC through a General Education Rubric Form.

### **Other Internal Assessment Procedures**

#### Focus Groups:

The GEAC should conduct bi-annual campus-wide focus groups made up of faculty, department heads, academic advisors, students, alumni, and prospective employers to

discuss general education at Nicholls. A GEAC facilitator could use a question guide appropriate to the particular focus group to initiate a candid discussion of the strengths and weaknesses of the general education program and to encourage recommendations. A summary of major points would then be submitted to the GEAC to be made part of its reporting process and disseminated to the faculty teaching general education courses.

### **Surveys:**

The GEAC should create surveys on the quality of general education for students and faculty. Student surveys, administered in a number of randomly chosen sections within a general education area, should not list the instructor's name and should in no way be related to evaluation of a specific instructor's effectiveness. The questionnaire could ask students to evaluate how well they are developing the general education learning outcomes connected to the course they are attending. Surveys of graduating seniors, of alumni, and of faculty can also offer valuable information for assessment.

### **Analysis of Available Data:**

The GEAC should make use of readily available student performance data such as the completion rates for the core proficiency courses Math 101 and English 102, as well as results from certification and professional exams.