

Step 1: Aligning Course Goals with General Education Outcomes

Effective assessment begins with reviewing and aligning curriculum and courses. This first step requires you to consider several important questions: What *outcomes*—that is, what blend of skills, knowledge, and values—are students expected to learn in our core curriculum? Which courses address these general educational outcomes? What specific activities in these courses teach and/or reinforce discrete, assessable parts of these outcomes, in this document called *measurable proficiencies*?

As you begin this process of *alignment*, you need to . . .

- 1. *Become familiar with VSU's eight General Education Outcomes.*** These outcomes are available at [link to "VSU General Education Outcomes" on GEC web page]. As you will see, they are broadly stated and written as paragraphs. In this format, Outcome statements are too general to assess. However, they do give a valuable overview of the general mix of knowledge, skills, and values that outline each educational target.
- 2. *Identify courses in your department that address these Outcomes.*** In fall 2008, every academic department identified the General Education Outcomes it addresses in each of its core curriculum courses. Review this document [link to Excel file: alignment of core courses and Gen Ed Outcomes]. As you will see, each core curriculum course addresses some of the skills and knowledge described in one or more of these outcomes. However, no single course addresses every facet of an outcome. As a result, your assessment team will work with the General Education Council to select one or two courses and to match them with appropriate general education outcomes.
- 3. *Identify specific Measurable Proficiencies that one or two courses directly address.*** The General Education Council has divided each Outcome into 3 to 8 discrete statements, called **Measurable Proficiencies**, which lend themselves more easily to analytical evaluation. Review the list of Measurable Proficiencies at [link to VSU General Education Outcomes with Measurable Proficiencies, including fall group assignments]. As you will see, this list also includes the outcomes and proficiencies that the first assessment groups have targeted. Identify at least two Measurable Proficiencies that your course or courses address in a reasonably thorough way.

After you have completed the alignment process, fill out sections A, B, and C of the General Education Assessment: Pilot Project Worksheet. Use a separate sheet for each Measurable Proficiency you plan to assess.

Step 2: “Operationalizing” Measurable Proficiencies

As you may have noticed, many of the Measurable Proficiency statements are still too broad and/or vague to assess profitably. Before you can evaluate your students’ mastery in these areas, you may need to “operationalize” these proficiency statements by identifying the specific knowledge and skills taught in the course you have selected.

For example, Outcome 1 states, in part, that students will “understand the roles of social institutions.” Obviously, this statement raises the question, “which institutions”? Clearly, every course will not address every social institution.

Other proficiency statements may be defined in very different ways depending on the courses in which they are assessed. For instance, Outcome 2 states that students will “possess an international viewpoint that will allow them to examine critically the culture of their own nation.”

In a sociology course, this statement might be assessed by asking students to critique marriage customs or kinship patterns in the United States by contrasting them with equivalent customs and patterns in another culture. In a political science course, assessment might ask students to critique the mechanisms for social change in this country by viewing them through the values and practices of another culture.

At this point, you need to examine each of the Measurable Proficiencies you have selected.

- 1. Identify any terms that need further definition or specification before they can be assessed.** Terms such as “social institutions,” “another culture,” “operational principles,” “diverse issues,” and the like must be defined.
- 2. Specify what these terms mean in the context of your course.** Which particular social institutions are discussed in your course? What other culture or cultures does your course address? Which “issues” and “principles” does your course cover? Obviously, you must answer these questions before you can assess how well your students are meeting these goals.

After you have completed this analysis, complete section D of the General Education Assessment: Pilot Project Worksheet.

Step 3: Selecting an Appropriate Assessment Activity

The next step is to identify or develop assessment activities that measure how well students have mastered the measurable proficiencies you have targeted. These activities should yield data that supports the broader purpose of assessment, which is to periodically monitor what we are doing, to identify areas that can be improved, and to make constructive changes.

Since General Education Assessment will be ongoing process, the assessments you select should be unobtrusive, simple to implement, and easy to assess. This crucial step involves the following activities:

1. Consider the long-term logistical issues involved. Since General Education assessment will be on-going, assessment activities should yield information that is

- easy to store (if the activities need to be kept on file),
- easy to retrieve (if that's necessary),
- easy to assess (by the instructor as well as by a separate departmental assessment committee).

2. Consider factors that will affect the type and amount of information you need to collect and the best instruments for doing so. What is the average class size for you courses? What kind of assignments do these courses typically use? The assessments you select should meet the following criteria:

- They are sustainable. (That is, they do not require heroic expenditures of students' or professors' time either to take or to assess.) Effective activities are ones that will you're your department enough information to make constructive changes while requiring the least amount of time and effort. In large sections, that might mean giving a machine-graded test to assess a key outcome. Primary trait analysis or other forms of close, qualitative assessment of individual work samples demand time, energy, and attention and should be used strategically.
- They are unobtrusive. (They fit naturally into the course and do not interrupt the normal flow of activities. Ideally, they are part of the current schedule of course assignments);
- They are typical. (If faculty members who teach the course are not already using the activity, then they can easily incorporate it into their syllabus).

3. Review assessment plans on other campuses. Many colleges and universities have already developed a variety of assessment mechanisms that you may be able to adapt. Some materials are available at the GEC website at

<http://www.valdosta.edu/gec/HelpfulAssessmentLinks.shtml>. Materials are also available in West Hall 120.

4. Select an appropriate format. The proficiency you target will help determine format you use. Certain kinds of knowledge and some very discrete skills lend themselves to objective questions. On the other hand, mastery of other skills, understanding of general principles and concepts, and evidence of the ability to apply certain ethical principles or aesthetic judgments may require written or spoken demonstrations. Consider the following format options.

Exam questions

These could include specifically targeted word problems or equations to be solved as part of an algebra test. On the other hand, they might include strategically worded short answer questions or paragraph-length discussion questions on a semester exam.

In-class activities

Examples could include exercises designed to assess students' ability to apply crucial concepts or skills that reflect General Education proficiencies, such as the ability to interpret data presented in statistical format or the ability to apply a set of ethical criteria to a real-world example. Central Michigan University's Faculty Center for Innovative Teaching offers several useful examples of these kinds of activities [[link to "Classroom Assessment Techniques"](#)].

Out of class assignments

Appropriate activities might include the following:

- a formal class presentation,
- a research exercise,
- a short response or reaction paper,
- a documented research paper, or
- any other regularly scheduled activity designed to assess students' ability to synthesize knowledge or demonstrate mastery of essential skills.

You will find examples illustrating all of these approaches in the password protected area of the General Education Council's homepage.

After you have weighed your options and have determined the most appropriate assessment activity to evaluate the knowledge and skills you have targeted, complete section E of the General Education Assessment: Pilot Project Worksheet.

Step 4: Defining Proficiency

The next step is to develop a clear definition of proficiency. For this project, you should develop three proficiency levels: (3) Exceeds Expectations (2) Meets Expectations, and (1) Fails to Meet Expectations.

Each level should be defined as specifically as possible so that other professors can apply these same standards will equivalent results.

Consider the following definition of proficiency levels for the assessment of an annotated bibliography used to evaluate students' ability to use computer searching tools to find information (Outcome 3):

Exceeds Expectation:

Work samples that exceed expectation will demonstrate at least one of the following proficiencies in addition to meeting all expectations listed below:

- they may use at least one specialized database or collection available online through Odum Library to (e. g. government documents or archival materials) locate specialized and/or less accessible information;
- they may develop a research bibliography that includes at least ten percent more relevant entries than the number required by the assignment; or
- they may include works that are exceptionally current, uniformly relevant, or that otherwise demonstrate significantly above-average computer research skills.

Meets Expectation:

Work samples that meet expectation use at least two of the following databases to develop a research bibliography:

Academic Search Complete

JSTOR

Research Library

Lexis-Nexis Complete

Masterfile

Odum Library's GIL catalog

Sources are generally relevant but occasionally may be dated or not entirely relevant to the topic. Each entry will identify the search engine used to locate it.

Fails to Meet Expectation:

Work samples that fail to meet expectations may demonstrate one or more of the following problems:

- They may not contain the required number of sources
- They may fail to identify the search tools used to locate the sources;
- They may rely upon a single search engine or research tool;
- They may contain many sources that are irrelevant, too dated, or otherwise inappropriate to the assigned topic

You will find examples illustrating various ways to identify these levels of proficiency in the password protected area of the General Education Council's homepage.

Develop statements of proficiency appropriate to your assessment activity, then complete section F of the General Education Assessment: Pilot Project Worksheet.

Step 5: Developing an Implementation Plan

The final stage in the assessment process is devising a plan to administer the assessment. Consider the following issues as you decide how many work samples you will collect, how many you will assess, who will assess them, and how you will report on your findings:

1. **Implementation:**

Number of sections: _____ Number of students: _____

2. **Collection:**

The number of work samples you examine will depend on the kind of assessment activities you develop. If, for example, you plan to use a series of objective questions on a machine-graded exam to measure proficiency, then you will probably tabulate and use all of your responses. However, you will need to consider other questions:

- a. How will responses to these specific questions be isolated and collected?
- b. Who will collate them and tabulate the results?

If, on the other hand, you plan to use class presentations, essays, or similar activities, then you may need to assess representative samples. In this case, consider the following questions:

- a. Who will select these representative work samples?
- b. What principle will be used to select them?
- c. Where and how will these samples be stored until they are assessed?

2. **Review and Evaluation:**

Whether you use objective questions or representative work samples, the work needs to be reviewed and analyzed by a group of departmental members.

- a. Who will examine and assess the work samples?
- b. When will this assessment occur: during the term? End of the term?

3. **Dissemination of Findings:**

- a. Who will be responsible for collecting and reporting the findings?
- b. What groups (beside the GEC) will see your findings?
- c. How will these findings be used?

After you have developed an implementation plan, complete sections G and H of the General Education Assessment: Pilot Project Worksheet.