

Final Report on GER Assessment Pilot

The primary purpose of GER course-based assessment is to provide faculty the motivation and the means for improving their GER courses as GER courses. The pilot project for GER assessment was established to determine whether the assessment plan passed by the Council on Undergraduate Education (CUE) was viable and valuable.

The pilot was a response to the approval by the CUE in spring 2003 of "A Proposal for Assessing General Education at NC State." This approval was the culmination of a broader process of instituting outcomes-based assessment of general education that had begun in the CUE in September 2001. According to the proposal, the role of the CUE would be to generate objectives for each category in the General Education Requirements (GERs), objectives that all courses in that category should meet; the role of faculty teaching GER courses would be to create outcomes designed to enable students to meet the objectives and to identify means of evaluating those outcomes. The CUE also voted for A Plan for Implementing "A Proposal for Implementing Assessment of General Education at NC State," which set forth a timeline for executing the assessment of the GERs. Included in this timeline for Spring 2003 and Fall 2003 was a pilot of the assessment procedure, approved by the CUE in recognition that such a revolutionary change in the university's approach to the GERs should be tested before being required of all faculty teaching GERs.

In spring 2004 the participants in the GER assessment pilot submitted the reports of their assessment of the GER courses they had taught in fall 2003, thus concluding the pilot project. They had been prepared for assessing those courses by attending two GER assessment workshops. The first workshop helped them to create student learning outcomes designed to help students to achieve the GER category objectives for their courses and to identify means of evaluating those outcomes. The second workshop guided them in revising course action forms and syllabi for their GER courses to reflect the new GER assessment procedures. Details of this first stage of the assessment pilot may be found in the "Interim Report on GER Assessment Pilot."

The purpose of this report is to evaluate the completed pilot assessment, including the findings from both semesters. This evaluation is based on the goals of the pilot.

Goals of GER Assessment Pilot

1. To identify any problems with the assessment procedure as outlined in the GER proposal
2. To determine if the objectives produced by the CUE would present any difficulties in translating into outcomes
3. To test materials developed for training faculty to create outcomes, identify means of evaluating outcomes, and document assessment findings

4. To generate assessment materials—course action forms and attached documentation and GER assessment reports—that could be used by CUE members for learning how to evaluate these materials and also for determining the viability of the new assessment procedure

Procedure

Fourteen faculty members participated in the first part of the pilot. All volunteered to participate, and those who agreed to complete the pilot received an honorarium. Participants were selected to ensure representation of all GER categories as well as courses at all academic levels. The category representation was as follows:

- Writing and speaking: 3
- Humanities (history): 1
- Visual and performing arts: 3
- Natural sciences: 3
- Mathematical sciences: 1
- Physical education: 1
- Social sciences: 1
- Science, technology, and society: 1

Courses ranged from 100 level to 400 level. Participating faculty also varied in experience teaching GER courses, ranging from first-year faculty to those who have been teaching at NC State for thirty years. This variation was important because the training materials must be appropriate to faculty at all levels of experience.

All participants but one (visual and performing arts) agreed to complete the two-semester pilot. That one participant attended the workshops in the first semester anyway.

Faculty training consisted of two sets of workshops in spring 2003 and one in fall 2004. Each workshop was offered on a Wednesday and a Thursday for the convenience of faculty.

GER Workshop 1 was given on March 2 and 3, 2003. This workshop introduced participants to the concepts of GER objectives, GER student learning outcomes, and means of evaluating those outcomes. Participants were asked to create GER student learning outcomes and identify means of evaluating those outcomes for their GER courses and to bring these materials to the next workshop.

GER Workshop 2 was given on March 16 and 24, 2003. This workshop focused on new requirements for the Course Action Form (CAF), which had been revised to reflect the GER assessment plan. Participants learned how to include GER assessment materials—objectives, outcomes, and means of evaluation—in the CAF documentation and how to revise their syllabi to include the appropriate GER materials. Participants were asked to submit new CAFs with appropriate documentation (including revised syllabus) by the

end of the semester. The workshop concluded with a preview of the next semester of the pilot, in which they would teach and assess their GER courses according to the new materials they had created.

GER Workshop 3 was given on November 19 and 20, 2004. This workshop provided guidance to participants in managing and documenting the assessment of their GER courses. Participants considered the process of moving from data to improvement of their courses and a report form designed for them to use in documenting their assessment. They were asked to submit their assessment reports by the beginning of the next semester, spring 2004.

Participants were asked to respond both informally and formally about their experience in the pilot. The informal responses were given during the last workshop when faculty were given the opportunity to describe what they had learned from the pilot. The formal responses came from a survey of pilot participants administered by Marilee J. Breschiani, Director of Assessment at NC State.

Results

Of the thirteen participants who agreed to complete the pilot, all but one (science, technology, and society) turned in revised CAFs and syllabi. All twelve of the remaining have turned in assessment reports (two were collaborating in assessing the First-Year Composition Program). Data from both the informal and formal surveys were overwhelmingly positive (see "Pilot Faculty Testimonials on GER Assessment Process" and "General Education Assessment Pilot Group Survey of Participants.")

What we Learned from Pilot Related to the Goals

1. *To identify any problems with the assessment procedure as outlined in the GER proposal*
No significant problems with the assessment procedure were exposed. Two issues related to the assessment plan that had not been settled before the pilot have now been settled in the process of running the pilot. One was whether or not the outcomes for a course should be applied to all sections of the course. This was addressed by faculty during the pilot, and most agreed that the course outcomes should be written generally enough to be applied to all sections. Subsequent workshops for other faculty now include the provision that outcomes be general to all sections of the course.

The other matter was the form and purpose of the assessment report. It was decided that the assessment report should reflect the primary purpose of GER assessment, which is to improve general education at NC State by provided faculty the motivation and the means for improving their courses as GER courses. Thus, the reports should be primarily formative in their purpose, meaning that they should be instruments for helping faculty close the feedback loop, to reflect on the data they have gathered and identify ways they can use what they have learned from the

data to improve their course. The secondary purpose of the assessment report is to provide the institution with evidence of continuous and ongoing assessment of the GERs. The “GER Guided Reflection on Student Learning” provides a format faculty can use to achieve both of the purposes of GER assessment.

2. *To determine if the objectives produced by the CUE would present any difficulties in translating into outcomes*

Some participants observed that some of the objectives were vague and needed some translation to understand what they really mean. No one identified objectives that were unworkable. Though it is likely that the CUE will revisit and revise some of the objectives in the future (for example, in response to a shift in understanding of what defines general education in a discipline or a realignment of the disciplines in the GERs as well as a need for greater clarity in an objective), it does not appear that such revision is necessary at this time.

3. *To test materials developed for training faculty to create outcomes, identify means of evaluating outcomes, and document assessment findings*

The training materials were generally helpful to faculty. Here is what we learned from the pilot:

- There was some confusion about the levels of generality represented by objectives, outcomes, and means of evaluating outcomes. Some faculty conceived of outcomes essentially as assignments. We have made the three levels of generality clearer in a revision of the workshop materials.
- Participants needed to move more deliberately through the steps for creating outcomes and means of evaluation. In the original workshop, we went over the three steps for each and then asked participants to do all the steps. We noted some confusion in a few participants. In the revision, we ask faculty to perform one step before going on to the next, which allows us to deal with any confusions at the point they occur.
- Our examples showed one means of evaluating each outcome. Some participants wanted to know if they could use multiple means of evaluation, such as a set of assignments related to an outcome. We offer this option in the revision of the workshop.
- We found that the focus on outcomes as what students learn to do in the course and the use of strong action verbs to describe those ways of doing (along with the use of Bloom’s Taxonomy) provided participants an effective guide to writing outcomes.
- One of the challenges of Workshop 3 was help faculty conceive of a process for using the data they had gathered for improving their courses. The workshop materials incorporated an assessment cycle: data to evaluation of the data to coming to a judgment about the data related to the course to acting on that judgment in identifying ways of improving the course. This assessment cycle

worked well in leading faculty step by step through the process of closing the feedback loop.

- Participants found the focus on formative assessment to be especially helpful. There had been some concern expressed in earlier sessions that the reports would be used summatively to judge the effectiveness of their GER courses. The alternative focus, on using data to improve their courses, allowed participants to see the value of assessment for them and for their students.

4. *To generate assessment materials—course action forms and attached documentation and GER assessment reports—that could be used by CUE members for learning how to evaluate these materials and also for determining the viability of the new assessment procedure*
The workshops produced new CAFs and documentation, including syllabi, that has been used to train members of the CUE. In their review of selected CAFs, the CUE recommended a slight revision in the presentation of objectives, outcomes, and means of evaluating outcomes. Noting some difficulty in determining which outcomes and means of evaluation were intended for a particular objective, the CUE recommended that outcomes and evaluation be placed beneath the appropriate objectives. The reports of guided reflection on course assessment will be used at a later time for training the CUE to evaluate reports. In addition to providing training materials, the documents produced by the pilot participants will allow the CUE to evaluate the viability and value of the broader process of GER assessment.

One problem with the generation of assessment materials in the pilot was the length of time between the Workshop 2 and the submission of CAFs and Workshop 3 and the submission of reports. It was clear that some participants did not refer to the guidelines for writing these documents as they were working on them. In the future, guidelines will be sent to participants along with a reminder before the documents are due.

Overall Assessment of Pilot

The pilot may be considered a success. It was successful in that it demonstrated that the GER assessment plan passed by the CUE is both viable and valuable. Faculty can create the materials necessary to the plan: learning outcomes, means of evaluating outcomes, and reports of the assessment. Faculty can engage in the process of course-based assessment, from generating outcomes to documenting what they've learned from evaluating the outcomes. And, perhaps most important, faculty find the process of assessment valuable. Their reflections on assessment, for the most part, demonstrated a genuine engagement in the process. And they reported that what they had learned provided them a way to improve their GER courses as GER courses, which is the primary purpose of GER assessment as it is set forth in the assessment plan. The participants reported that the benefits of assessment outweigh the costs in time.