

Assessing General Education at NC State
A Guide for College Curriculum Committees

GER Assessment: A Rationale

When we think of general education at NC State, we think of the General Education Requirements (GERs), the extensive list of courses in different academic categories that outlines our collective sense of a general education for all students. But general education is not just a list of various required courses; it is an experience that shapes our students, offering them a wider comprehension of their lives and a solid foundation for being an effective citizen and professional in a diverse and changing world. General education is one of the key defining experiences of an education at NC State.

It is precisely because general education plays such an important role at our university that it must be assessed. This was clear in the original discussions that founded the present GERs and remains clear today. Assessment is critical in providing a way to determine how well the general education program is achieving its aims and also how to improve the program so that it can better meet those aims. But it is also clear that such a large program that includes so many departments represents a challenge for meaningful assessment, one that will attain both of the goals of assessing the program.

The Council for Undergraduate Education (CUE) has taken up that challenge and created a viable plan for assessing the GERs. The plan involves both the CUE, which is the administrative body that oversees and is responsible for evaluating the GERs, and faculty teaching GER courses. Without the involvement of the former, the assessment would lack the necessary broad vision of the general education program as a whole. And without the involvement of the latter, the assessment would lack any meaningful way of improving the general education experience of students in GER classes.

Thus, GER assessment takes place on two levels. The CUE has created a set of general GER objectives outlining certain kinds of learning that define each of the GER academic categories. The faculty teaching GER courses will generate learning outcomes for their courses, outcomes that enable students in their classes to meet the objectives for the appropriate GER category. Faculty will then assess their courses as GER courses, in terms of their students' ability to meet the GER objectives, and report the findings of their assessment and any changes they will make in the course to improve students' learning.

The chief advantage of this two-pronged approach is that it provides the means of both assessing the GERs as a whole and improving individual GER courses. There are other advantages for faculty accruing from GER objectives. One is that they ensure a greater consistency across courses within a GER category; academic advisors can be sure that any course their students take in a particular category will share certain basic objectives. Another advantage is that the objectives provide the criteria faculty must use to propose

a course for a GER category; previously the standards for inclusion in (or exclusion from) GER categories have been obscure. Now, faculty know precisely what they must do on course action forms: demonstrate that their proposed courses contain learning outcomes and assessment instruments that are specifically aligned to all the GER objectives in the appropriate category.

Proposed Revision of Course Action Form

As a part of GER assessment, the Course Action Form will be changed to reflect the new expectations for all GER courses. The new Course Action Forms that will come before college curriculum committees will include additional documentation for GER courses. Instead of the present GER justification, the new documentation requests faculty to provide the GER category or categories associated with the course, the appropriate GER objectives, student learning outcomes related to those objectives, and means of designed to evaluate the extent to which students attain those outcomes.

Present Course Action Form

DOCUMENTATION AS REQUIRED:

- Course Justification
- Proposed Revision(s) with Reasons
- Student Learning Objectives
- Enrollment for last 5 years
- Resources
- Consultation with other Departments
- GER Justification
- Syllabus (Current and Proposed)

Proposed Course Action Form

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- Course Justification
- Proposed Revision(s) with Reasons
- Student Learning Objectives
- Enrollment for last 5 years
- Resources
- Consultation with other Departments
- GER Course Documentation
 - GER category objectives
 - GER student learning outcomes
 - Means of evaluating GER outcomes
- Syllabus (Current and Proposed)

Definitions of Key Terms Related to GER Assessment

GER objectives

Broad statements of the goals for each of the GER categories, natural sciences, humanities, social sciences, etc. In order to create a basic consistency among courses in each of these categories, each GER course should include a set of learning outcomes designed to enable students to attain *all* the objectives for its category. The GER objectives should be listed along with the other course objectives on the course syllabus.

GER student learning outcomes

Specific statements for a particular GER course of what students are expected to learn that will enable them to achieve GER objectives. These learning outcomes describe what students should be able to do upon successful completion of the course. They may be thought of as translations of the broad objectives of a GER category into the specific academic focus of the course. Though specific to the course, the learning outcomes should be written generally enough so that different teachers teaching the same course using somewhat different pedagogies would find them appropriate to their classes. Course learning outcomes should be listed on the course syllabus.

Evaluation instruments for assessing GER student learning outcomes

Writing assignments, homework, oral presentations, essay questions on tests, or other opportunities by which students can demonstrate and teachers can evaluate how well students have achieved the GER learning outcomes. The various assignments are specific to individual teachers and may be different for different teachers teaching the same course. Each assignment is carefully designed to provide the teacher with information that will allow him or her to judge the effectiveness of the course in enabling students to meet a particular learning outcome and thus the GER objective associated with that outcome.

Sample GER Category Objectives

GER Objectives: Natural Sciences

Each course in the natural sciences category of the General Education Requirements will provide instruction and guidance that help students to:

1. use the methods and processes of science in testing hypotheses, solving problems, and making decisions; and
2. articulate, make inferences from, and apply to solving problems, scientific concepts, principles, laws, and theories.

GER Objectives: Writing and Speaking

Each course in the writing and speaking category of the General Education Requirements will provide instruction and guidance that help students to:

1. communicate effectively in specific writing or speaking situations, which may include various academic, professional, or civic situations; and
2. understand and respond appropriately to the critical elements that shape communication situations, such as audience, purpose, and genre; and
3. critique their own writing or speaking and provide effective and useful feedback to enable other students to improve their writing or speaking; and
4. demonstrate critical and evaluative thinking skills in locating, analyzing, synthesizing, and using information in writing or speaking activities

Linking GER Category Objectives to Outcomes and Evaluation

Faculty teaching GER courses will be asked to generate learning outcomes for each GER objective and identify ways of evaluating those outcomes. Here are two examples of general objectives and course-specific outcomes and means of evaluation.

Natural Sciences

Objective: to articulate, make inferences from, and apply to solving problems, scientific concepts, principles, laws, and theories.

Outcome: in Chemistry 100, students should be able to describe a basic chemical principle, to explain a specific chemical process in which the principle is applied, and to state what the chemical process tells the students about the principle.

Evaluation: students will demonstrate their achievement of the outcome through a lab exercise, such as: The principle of quantization of energy provides for an explanation of why certain materials burn in flames of certain colors. State the principle of quantization of energy. Then, apply the concept of quantization of energy to the burning of wood. What color is the flame of wood? Explain why it is that color. What does the color of wood flame tell you about the nature of reacting materials? Finally, explain how you used the principle of quantization of energy to reach your conclusion.

Writing and Speaking

Objective: to critique their own writing or speaking and provide effective and useful feedback to enable other students to improve their writing or speaking.

Outcome: in English 322, students should be able to critique their own writing or speaking in business situations and provide effective and useful feedback to enable other students to improve their writing or speaking.

Evaluation: students will demonstrate their achievement of the outcome through two activities:

- Filling out peer review sheets for each assignment in such a way that the review provides valuable criticism of the peer's communication
- Using the required video-tape of a student's oral presentation, that student will write a report evaluating the presentation and outlining ways that the presentation can be improved

A Complete Example of GER Documentation for Course Action Form: English 251 Major British Authors

GER Category Objectives: Humanities (Literature)

Each course in the literature category of the General Education Requirements will provide instruction and guidance that help students to:

1. understand and engage in the human experience through the interpretation of literature (this objective must be the central focus of each literature course); and
2. become aware of the act of interpretation itself as a critical form of knowing in the study of literature; and
3. make scholarly arguments about literature using reasons and ways of supporting those reasons that are appropriate to the field of study.

GER Student Learning Outcomes

Students should be able to:

1. interpret a literary text or texts as a way of enhancing their understanding of the human experience, showing that they can examine their own presuppositions related to the human experience and use the text(s) to discover a more complex understanding of the experience.
2. demonstrate their awareness of the complex and dynamic nature of the interpretation of literary texts, the forces that shape interpretation.
3. make academic arguments about the text of a major British author using reasons and evidence from texts to support the reasons

Means of Evaluating GER Learning Outcomes

Students will demonstrate their achievement of the outcomes through:

1. an essay assignment, such as : Discuss the play, *Anthony and Cleopatra*, in terms of love. The best discussions are those that demonstrate an understanding of the complexity of love as represented in the play, treat that understanding of love as related to modern assumptions of love, and show what you have learned about love through your reading and analysis of the play.
2. an essay exam question, such as: Identify a literary passage and discuss the significance of that passage. Your discussion should demonstrate your understanding of the passage as central to the interpretation of the text it is taken from, different ways it could be interpreted, and how different interpretations are shape the understanding of the text.

2. an essay assignment, such as: Respond to one of the following questions: What is the greatest act of betrayal in *Anthony and Cleopatra*? Or How does Cleopatra destabilize gender boundaries in the play? In your response you should make your answer as an argumentative claim and use evidence from the play to support your claim.

Criteria for College Curriculum Committees in Evaluating GER Documentation in Course Action Forms

Course Action Forms will continue to follow the usual route: departmental curriculum committees to college curriculum committees to UCCC and, for GER courses, to CUE. Departmental committees, because they have a greater knowledge of the courses, should do the major evaluation of GER documentation on Course Action Forms in terms of whether or not the learning outcomes and means of evaluation are feasible and appropriate to a course. The college curriculum committee will take a broader perspective.

The overall criterion to be applied is that the course should be an effective GER course, one that provides instruction by which students can achieve the benefits of a general education as it has been defined by NC State. Specifically, it should enable students to meet the appropriate GER objectives. Here is a set of questions college curriculum committees may apply to GER documentation.

1. Are all the elements of GER documentation present: GER category designation, category objectives, student learning outcomes, means of evaluating the outcomes?
2. Do the GER category objectives reflect the current objectives posted on the GER web site? Are all the objectives for that category listed?
3. Are there outcomes and means of evaluation for *all* the GER objectives?
4. Does each outcome describe an expectation specific to the course that, in your best judgment, will enable students to attain the appropriate general objective?
5. Are the means of evaluating the outcomes valid; in other words, are they designed in such a way that they would reasonably allow the professor of the course to determine the extent to which students are able to achieve the related learning outcome?
6. Are the GER category designation, objectives, and students learning outcomes included in the attached course syllabus (outcomes may be listed separately or within the broader set of student outcomes for the course)?

If the answers to questions 1-3 and 6 are no or unclear, then the college curriculum committee may send the Course Action Form back to the department for completion. If the answers to questions 4-5 are no or unclear, then the committee may send the Course Action Form back to the department for further attention and/or request that the form

be brought back to the college curriculum committee with an attached explanation addressing the problem.

Talking Points

Background of GER assessment

- We have been requiring general education courses here for over a decade now
- We've known from the earliest conversations of GERs that they must be assessed
- An immense program, 750 courses taught through about 55 departments, affecting every student on this campus: **IMPORTANT TO ASSESS**
- We needed to gather that would enable us to determine whether or not it is achieving the goals of a general education and to provide guidance for improving GER courses AS GER courses.
- But how do we do that?

New GER assessment plan

- CUE to create general objectives for each category, and all courses in each category must enable students to meet those general objectives
- Professors for each course will produce student learning outcomes specific to their courses that are designed to enable their students to meet each GER objective
- Evaluation instruments designed to provide data for professors to determine the extent to which students are able to meet the outcomes.
- What does this have to do with you?

New Course Action Form (**page 2**)

- Changes in GER documentation: objectives, outcomes, evaluation **ON THE FORM**
- This will be a part of this committee's review of the Course Action Form
- You will be looking at and evaluating GER documentation: objectives, outcomes, evaluation.

Guide to Reviewing course action forms

- Definitions of key terms (**pages 2-3**)
- Sample GER objectives (**page 3**)
- Relationship among objectives, outcomes, and evaluation of outcomes; *look at an example* (**pages 3-4**).
 - *Objectives* come from CUE, define general education for a GER category.
 - *Student learning outcomes* describe expectations specific to a course that enable students to meet an objective.
 - *Evaluation*: what students are asked to do in order for the professor to determine the extent to which students have achieved the outcome.

A complete example of GER documentation (**pages 4-5**)

Criteria for college curriculum committees to apply to forms (**pages 5-6**)

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