

2004-05 General Education Assessment Activity Report

Leadership

In 2004-05, the General Education Committee shifted to a new structure for the assessment of student learning in the UW-Madison General Education Requirements. This transition was precipitated by two key changes in our assessment leadership: Professor Joel Robbins was no longer able to serve as director of the Quantitative Assessment Project, and Professor Denise Solomon, formerly director of the Verbal Assessment Project, left UW-Madison. Professor of Sociology and Associate Dean for the Social Sciences (L&S) Charles Halaby agreed to serve as the Research Director for General Education Assessment.

Dean Halaby's research interests and efforts have influenced the direction of General Education Assessment in 2004-05, which were concentrated in the area of quantitative reasoning. Nonetheless, Dean Halaby was an active participant in more broad discussions of assessment of student learning, both within the General Education Committee as well as in the campus Assessment Council.

Assessment Projects, 2004-2005

1. **Comm B Course Database:** Efforts to construct a database of courses offering Comm B credit since the inception of the requirement came to a halt with the departure of Melania Alvarez-Adem. Before she left, however, she and Assistant Dean Mike Pflieger were able to complete several analyses that identified a few problem areas that might be addressed in the administration and future assessment of the Comm B requirement. These include such questions as which Comm B courses are taken by students who only take one Comm B course; which Comm B courses seem to be taken frequently in combination with other Comm B courses; and which courses seem to be frequently taken as transfer courses for which Comm B credit may be inappropriately applied. Responses to the first of these questions may suggest areas requiring further assessment and investigation. Although no problematic patterns were discerned in the analysis of the second question, this information has been useful as the Communication liaison and Gen Ed Administrators consider adding courses to the Comm B course array. (For example, resource implications would be considered carefully if a request were made to add Comm B credit and instructional support to a course that appears frequently as a second or third Comm B experience, or that serves as a prerequisite to a higher level course that conveys Comm B.) Finally, the question of transfer credit has been a "known Comm B issue" for some time; a solution has been proposed and will be pursued by L&S Administration in the coming months.

The utility of these analyses suggests that the campus data systems can be used effectively for ongoing inquiries into questions about managing General Education resources well. We have been pleased to learn that the Office of Academic Planning and Analysis can also provide consultation and advice in this area.

2. **Student articulation and awareness project.** In Fall 2004, Drs. Brian Bubenzer and Elaine Klein conducted a series of "mini-focus groups" with new students enrolled in

elementary-level undergraduate courses. The courses selected were populated mostly by freshmen, and three of the discussions were timed to capture students who had not yet registered for courses for Spring, and who were therefore likely to be least familiar with the registration and advising processes. Finally, efforts were made to include a non-L&S course to insure that the study reached students from another college. These decisions were made to establish a baseline level of experiences upon which further discussions of the General Education Requirements might be built.

Twelve to fifteen students participated in each of the four sessions conducted. They were asked a series of general questions intended to determine their level of awareness about the requirements (what they are, the purpose they serve) and how they might find out more about the requirements. The responses to the four questions were uniform among all four of the groups:

- Few of the students felt confident that they could identify the requirements. Approximately half of the participants reported that they had some vague conception of the requirements; the other half of the students reported that they had “no idea” of the requirements. When those who admitted some familiarity were asked to identify the Gen Ed requirements, participants were able collectively to list some, if not all of them; however, students confused the Gen Ed requirements and the L&S degree requirements.
- Overall impressions of the Gen Ed requirements were not positive. Participants conveyed a sense that the requirements were burdensome, or that they exist as items to complete before students can enroll in courses they really want. When asked to consider why the requirements exist, standard suggestions were offered (e.g., the need for a “well-rounded” education, or to allow students to sample different subjects).
- Overwhelmingly, students reported that they first learned of the requirements at SOAR; however, most students had not spoken with anyone about the requirements subsequent to that first experience at SOAR.
- Having already noted that were unfamiliar with the requirements, participants had little to add when asked whether the GERs had an impact on their course selections. A number of students observed that they would give additional thought to the requirements, now that they had learned of their existence.

Given the strength and consistency of these responses, it was determined that the baseline level of understanding had been established and further inquiry into these questions is, for the moment, unnecessary. The next step for this aspect of assessment of General Education will be to consider the extent to which instructors are aware of, understand, and communicate with students about the GERs. (See item 3, below.)

The use of “mini-focus groups” was sufficient for the purpose of investigating assumptions about student perceptions of the General Education Requirements. Challenges faced in the course of this project ranged from the unanticipated effects of the Teaching Assistant work action to the laborious task of soliciting participation from instructors teaching courses offered at the appropriate level in which a sufficient number of students in the target population were enrolled. The scope of the study was not broad enough to draw anything but

limited, general conclusions, and if the results had been more equivocal, it would have been necessary to pursue this line of inquiry in another way.

3. **Web survey of faculty, instructional academic staff, and teaching assistants.** A design team has been convened to develop this survey in consultation with the UW Survey Center. Initial discussions have focused on the need to focus our inquiries on the “breadth” element of General Education, since the assessment of the Quantitative Reasoning and Communication requirements is well under way.
4. **Assessment of the QR-A requirement.** Two studies were conducted in close collaboration with the School of Education Office of Testing and Evaluation Services and the UW Survey Center.

- (1) The Office of Testing and Evaluation Services provided Project Assistant and other support to Dean Halaby for the first of two QR-A studies. TES was best able to assist in this effort because it involved administering a test comprised of questions that appear on the Math Placement Examination (required for admission to the UW-Madison). The test was given to a random sample of first year students who, based on their Math Placement Examination scores, were required to take a course to satisfy the QR-A requirement. Two groups of students were tested, in both Fall and Spring semesters, to ensure that the study examined the performance of students who were enrolled in QR-A courses within the first 30 credits in coursework during their undergraduate careers. Since all subjects tested had taken this examination before, the retest design afforded Dean Halaby the opportunity to measure the difference in scores of students who had taken QR-A coursework to those of students who had not taken a QR-A course. Preliminary results have been analyzed and presented to the General Education Committee; a final report will be presented to the committee in Fall '05.

From an “assessment perspective” several aspects of this study design seem to have played an important role in obtaining high levels of participation. The invitation to participate in the study was issued by the Provost, in a formal letter sent to students’ local addresses. Reminder messages were sent to students prior to the examination. The incentive to participate was a substantial (\$25.00) monetary award that doubled if students’ scores improved. Students also received a token gift (a calculator that was provided, in part, to replicate the test conditions at the time of the initial placement test experience). Participation rates dropped in the second semester – perhaps because by then, our first year students had gained enough experience in college to consider participation in the study to be “optional” rather than “mandatory”.

- (2) The second QR study was conducted as a paper-and-pencil survey of student perceptions of their own quantitative reasoning skills. This work was conducted in two phases. In the first phase, Dean Halaby worked to design an instrument that would reflect instructors’ understanding about the dimensions of quantitative reasoning. He convened a group of campus experts and instructors in quantitative reasoning to develop a set of eight to ten dimensions of quantitative reasoning skills (these efforts will inform future work in this

area). Working from this set of dimensions, Dean Halaby worked with the UW Survey Center to design a brief survey that was administered to a random sample of 400 first-year students who were asked to assess their own skills on these dimensions. A key element of the survey is that it did not explicitly address or discuss *math* skills, but rather, described abilities related to the dimensions of *quantitative reasoning*. The sample was drawn from students who were required to take a QR-A course to fulfill the QR-A requirement; the sample was divided between those who were currently enrolled in a QR-A course and (at the time the survey was in the field) had not yet taken a course to fulfill the requirement. The survey has been completed and the data are only now available for analysis.

This survey yielded an unusually high rate of response – upwards of 86% - which has been attributed to two factors: its administration as a pen-and-pencil survey (rather than the web-based strategy initially proposed), and the use of a “pre-incentive” (\$5.00) paid to all recipients in the sample.

The efficacy of specific assessment strategies are noted in context above; questions about any of these projects may be directed to any of the people listed below.

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