

2022-10-09

Suzie Park (on behalf of the HLC Assessing General Education Seminar attendees, Fall 2022)

A team of six faculty—Nora Heist, Chris Mitchell, Suzie Park, Tim Taylor, Grant Sterling, and Jeff Stowell—attended the **HLC Assessing General Education Seminar**. These are their stories.

Reflect, prioritize, streamline, align: what is our shared mission?

In the forced reflection segment of the seminar, we were asked to work with the program we have and not with the program we *wish* we had. To effectively assess and administer a GenEd program, we must first understand WHY we have a GenEd program and WHY we assess it.

Answer: to improve student learning. We need to work toward reaching consensus on and clearly outlining EIU's GenEd variables: **philosophy, structure, outcomes, rules, and processes.**

The stars must align in communicating our shared mission: GenEd goals = university learning goals = university mission. A quick perusal of EIU's GenEd program as advertised in the course catalogue gives a confusing picture of what we want students to learn. There are, at a minimum, 54 GenEd student learning outcomes. There are 30 university learning outcomes. These 54 and 30 do not align, and they should. We do not (and cannot) measure all of these, as we should. A course catalogue needs to provide clear and distinct guidelines for students, faculty, and advisors.

Agree upon a shared vocabulary of performance indicators (i.e., outcomes must be assessed, so don't name it unless you want and truly need to assess it)

Such outcome proliferation confusion is not unique to EIU. Many GenEd programs were designed before folks realized that the learning produced as a result of the program would need to be assessed someday. We need to define student learning outcomes by agreeing upon **PERFORMANCE INDICATORS**. These PIs, which should be shared and understood across undergraduate disciplines, provide a shared vocabulary to describe expectations for student learning. Good PIs provide faculty with clear directions for implementation in the classroom, make expectations explicit to students, and focus data collection.

Reset measures and methods: sample size, sample source, and report writing

University-wide assessment of the five university learning goals—writing, speaking, responsible citizenship, critical thinking, and quantitative reasoning—needs major retooling.

Using inherited methods of assessment and report-writing, here is how we currently assess these goals:

Writing: direct assessment

This goal has the longest assessment history, but it is saddled (see below) by a negative reputation and other problems. Its administration needs a hard reset towards its ultimate purpose: what do we want to learn about students' writing skills so that we may improve it?

- 1) All students must submit three papers written for EIU courses to the Electronic Writing Portfolio (EWP). All faculty who already graded these papers receive an email requiring them to rate these papers using an EWP rubric. If students and faculty do not meet these requirements, the consequences are grave: students are barred from future registration and, in the worst scenarios, graduating from EIU.
- 2) The 3000+ paper submissions in any given academic year are vetted by a single person; such vetting includes resolving (or not resolving) issues of student-faculty disagreements. Remember that unresolved issues means no graduation (which sends a purely negative message about writing to our potential alumni).
- 3) The Assessment Director (Suzie Park) asks a group of faculty readers to assess a randomly selected portion of complete portfolios.
- 4) The Assessment Director writes a Readings Report and shares it with faculty.

Speaking: direct assessment

While improvements can always be made, this learning goal is the clearest and most effectively administered.

- 1) Faculty teaching CMN 1310 and EIU Senior Seminars use a speech rubric (now digitized) to assess their students.
- 2) These rubrics are submitted to Carrie Gossett.
- 3) The Basic Course Director (Nora Heist) writes a report and shares it with faculty.

Responsible Citizenship: indirect assessment

Students give their opinions about their political proclivities, community involvement, and attitudes to racial and cultural differences (drawing from the Wabash National Study of Liberal Arts Education and the Miville-Guzman Universality-Diversity Scale-Short Form). This goal needs an updated instrument.

- 1) Freshmen take a responsible citizenship survey when they come to campus for orientation. Seniors take this survey when they are enrolled in an EIU Senior Seminar.
- 2) The Assessment Director (Suzie Park) writes a report and shares it with faculty.

Critical Thinking: direct/indirect assessment

This goal is described in the EIU course catalogue as ubiquitous, yet the measures are unclear, random, and, occasionally, counterfactual: "Critical thinking infusion in all general education courses." Vaguely advertised and lacking direct assessment, this goal needs attention.

- 1) EWP faculty readers apply an additional rubric (the new critical thinking rubric) to the same set of EWP portfolios that they assess for the EWP report.
- 2) A designated faculty member (Kirstin Duffin) writes a report and shares it with faculty.

Quantitative Reasoning: indirect assessment

This goal has the least developed assessment method and mechanism. Faculty teaching quantitative reasoning were asked to fill out a rubric assessing the quantitative skills of

their students, in the aggregate. Grant Sterling is convening a quantitative reasoning subcommittee that will be tasked with creating and administering a new test and/or rubric.

Increase faculty engagement: remember that faculty are the expert assessors

Everything boils down to one thing: we need to emphasize and work towards reaching a shared goal across campus, and that is to improve student learning. This is why we assess; it is a means to a better end. We need to move away from mere compliance (culture of assessment) and move toward an authentic commitment to improving student learning. We need to respect—and draw upon—the knowledge of expert assessors on campus. These are the faculty. Before we ask anyone to do anything, we must evaluate the dimensions of feasibility: cost? time? complexity? credibility?

In developing our **action plan and timeline** (see attached), our group has prioritized the following:

- 1) Getting feedback: faculty and student focus groups as opportunities to learn directly about what we are doing well and what we need to improve
- 2) Developing clear, shared learning outcomes (performance indicators)
- 3) Aligning GenEd program learning goals with University learning goals
- 4) Raising positive awareness about the actual functions of GenEd assessment: discussion, reporting, and improving
- 5) Retooling and beta testing the three least-mature learning goals (quantitative reasoning, critical thinking, responsible citizenship)