COMMON QUESTIONS: ASSESSMENT of GENERAL EDUCATION COURSES

1. WHAT AM I ASSESSING?

You are assessing the General Education Competencies that the course addresses. These Competencies are listed on the **scoring rubric** for the course (rubrics are created for each GE Element). The Competencies align with the broad GE Goals that are the foundation of the class. Your specific student learning outcomes (as stated on the course syllabus) should align with the rubric competencies.

2. WHY NOT JUST USE COURSE GRADES?

Course grades are based on a combination of various course assignments. A student who earns a "B" in a course may have earned an "A" on three exams, and a "D" on a research paper. The global grade of "B" provides no information regarding in which parts of the course the student performed better or worse. On the other hand, assessment results for this student might indicate that he/she performed well only on lower-level thinking tasks, such as comprehension of information, which is often evaluated with exams. Assessment results might show that this same student performed poorly on higher-level thinking tasks, such as integration of material, which might be evaluated via a written assignment, or essay questions on an exam.

Thus, assessment allows us to tease apart the various learning outcomes for the course and determine student learning separately for each outcome. When learning is strong for an outcome, faculty can feel confident that the current curriculum (e.g., lesson plans, assignments) could be maintained. On the other hand, when learning is weak, faculty can tweak just that part of the curriculum in order to help students better learn specific outcomes.

3. HOW DO WE KNOW ASSESSMENT ITEMS ARE VALID?

The issue of validity (do items measure the construct accurately?) is no different for an assessment instrument than it is for other types of student-learning evaluation (e.g., exams, papers). One type of validity that is important for academic tests is *content validity*, which refers to whether assessment items (or test items) reflect a specific domain of content. Thus, assessment items for a math course might include decisions regarding which formulas to use, performance of calculations, and interpretations of results. By creating assessment items that fit each competency on the rubric, assessment items are likely to have better content validity than many tests. Ultimately, the validity of the assessment instrument reflects that knowledge base of the people who created it. This is why assessment instruments should be created by faculty experts. When a group of experts collaborate on creating assessment items, the validity is likely to be better than when only one expert creates items.

4. HOW DO WE DEVELOP AN ASSESSMENT INSTRUMENT?

First, departments should strive to involve as many faculty as possible in the creation of an assessment instrument. Faculty should discuss what they perceive as the important aspects of a course, note the commonalities, and agree on a "core set" of course material. Faculty should then collaborate on developing assessment items that (a) measure this core set of material, and (b) fit the competencies on the appropriate rubric developed for GE.

Second, faculty should discuss the procedure for administering the assessment items. The assessment items should be embedded in an exam or assignment that is given later in the semester in order to test what students have learned in the course. All faculty should give the assessment at a similar time and in a similar context. Students should be told the same thing about the assessment – specifically, NOTHING that you would not normally say about an exam.

5. HOW DO WE GRADE THE ASSESSMENT ITEMS?

Individual faculty should grade their students' assessment items, use the score as part of the students' grade, and use the overall results to determine potential strengths and weaknesses of his/her individual course. This individual grading may or may not be standardized. For example, if the assessment involves a research paper, one faculty member might decide to weigh the literature review 30%, while another faculty member may weigh the literature review only 10%. However, these scores are for the individual faculty members' use; they are not the scores that are reported for assessment purposes.

For purposes of reporting assessment results, data from all sections should be aggregated. Thus, instructors might submit to a committee all the assessment exams/papers. That committee might select a random sample (See Appendix A) and grade (or re-grade) the items according the GE Element-specific Scoring Rubric. All faculty members should grade several assignments to check for reliability in grading procedures. If grading appears to be reliable for several assignments, then one faculty person could grade each assignment, while collaborating with other graders when necessary.

Scoring student work in a group provides opportunities for faculty to discuss common errors, and strengths and weakness of students, and provides opportunities to discuss potential changes to the assessment instrument, process, instructions to students, and/or course lesson plans. **This is the preferred procedure and allows faculty to discuss appropriate ways to USE the data from assessments. Ultimately, using the data in an attempt to improve student learning is the goal of GE assessment.**