

Westfield State University Guiding Principles for General Education Assessment

The purpose of general education assessment at Westfield State University is to gather information that will inform the actions we take to support faculty in their work to improve teaching and learning in general education. In stating the following guiding principles, we recognize that general education assessment is one component of WSU's broader assessment processes.

Effective assessment of teaching and learning in general education requires that our practices are guided by the following **principles**:

- Assessment will always be faculty driven, building on faculty experience and expertise, as well as the work that faculty, departments, and programs already do to assess student learning in general education.
- Our work will be informed by scholarship on assessment and teaching and learning within and across disciplines.
- Assessment will clearly connect to the mission of our institution and the goals we hold for student learning in our general education program.
- The methods of assessment we use will be flexible enough to incorporate different approaches disciplines take in gathering information about student learning.
- We will use assessment to build community in order to support faculty development and teaching. Information will be presented in the aggregate so that no individual faculty or courses can be identified, to keep the focus on our shared responsibility for improving student learning in general education.
- We will support assessment by providing adequate resources, time, and professional development for participating adjunct and tenure-track faculty and staff; by facilitating reflection and conversation across disciplines; and by recognizing assessment as a scholarly activity.
- We will regularly review and adapt our assessment structures as needed to ensure that they are actually helping us improve student learning.
- General education assessment will work within governance structures as outlined in the MSCA/BHE Agreement and coordinate with the Curriculum Committee as they conduct university-wide studies of the overall academic program and consider and propose major changes in the curriculum design.

In support of these principles, we will use our general education reform process **to lay the groundwork for our general education assessment practices** as we:

- Initiate conversations about what we want for our students, working across disciplines to define clear goals for our general education program and general education courses.
- Consider a variety of methods of general education assessment (eg., course-based, program-level, portfolios, student surveys, etc...) and engage with faculty, staff, and students across campus to make decisions about the methods that will work best for Westfield State University.

- Put in place clear, manageable, structural incentives to ensure that we are actively conducting assessment of student learning in general education.

Appendix 1:

Portland State University Studies support and assessment guiding principles:

“The purpose of faculty support across all levels of University Studies is fourfold:

- to inspire community and culture-building throughout the program;
- to catalyze continuing growth among faculty professionally and pedagogically, in alignment with University Studies’ mission and vision;
- to meet faculty where they are through wraparound services for all faculty associated with the program; and
- to increase faculty involvement in and ownership of programmatic assessment.

We believe that effective assessment and continuous improvement of professional practice is rooted in a collegial community where faculty have opportunities to critically reflect on their professional practice together with other colleagues from across ranks/disciplines in settings designed to be mutually supportive and in ways that have no negative impact on the individual’s job security. We see faculty as agents of their own practice.

In support of those principles we

- Invite faculty who teach in the program to participate, including all ranks, regardless of full-time or part-time status, and all departmental affiliations.
- Include reflection--alone and in community--as part of almost all of our faculty support activities.
- Provide space and time for faculty to talk to each other in service of fostering relationships, communities of mutual support, and understanding of our students.
- Honor faculty’s unique experience and expertise--as a place to build from and as a source of information about our program.
- Present any assessment information in the aggregate so no faculty can be identified and we focus on our responsibility as a whole.
- Present multiple sources of information and honor faculty and student voices, in addition to any quantitative information we may have, as data.
- Are responsive and flexible, addressing faculty support and assessment needs as they emerge.
- Invest in faculty development and support:

Fund an assessment director.

Fund part-time buyouts for coordinators of faculty support as needed”

(above quoted from Carpenter and Fitzmaurice 98-99).

Appendix 2: Annotated Bibliography of Sources Used to Develop Guiding Principles

AAC&U. VALUE - Valid Assessment of Learning in Undergraduate Education. Association of American Colleges and Universities.

<https://www.aacu.org/value>

VALUE (Valid Assessment of Learning in Undergraduate Education) is a campus-based assessment approach developed and led by AAC&U. This approach has been used and researched by many campuses and would provide a straightforward, “ready made” option for assessment at WSU. Faculty acquire artifacts of student work and submit them for evaluation by faculty at other institutions. Two important negative aspects of this option are: 1) there is a substantial financial commitment and 2) WSU would have to adopt the learning outcomes used by the VALUE rubrics.

Allen, Mary J. Assessing General Education Programs. Jossey-Bass, An Imprint of Wiley (2006). -

<https://www.amazon.com/Assessing-General-Education-Programs-Allen/dp/1882982959>

Very good broad overview of assessing general education, including many specific examples of assessment, rubrics, etc. Some sections of this book could be useful for group discussions, including examples of developing missions, goals and outcomes from many different kinds of institutions. includes discussion of the importance of connecting courses in the general education curriculum with specific learning outcomes. Includes some discussion of student retention and success. Addresses the big picture of how assessment can work overall for general education, focused on three types of assessment: 1) course-level, 2) program-level, and 3) institutional-level. Developing the assessment plan includes thinking about sample sizes, sequencing the steps, and who does the work.

Banta, Trudy W. and Catherine A. Palomba. *Assessment Essentials : Planning, Implementing, and Improving Assessment in Higher Education*, “Chapter 8: Assessing Learning in General Education.” John Wiley & Sons, Incorporated, 2014. ProQuest Ebook Central, <https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/westfielduniv-ebooks/detail.action?docID=1782543>.

Trudy Banta is Professor of Higher Education and Senior Advisor to the Chancellor for Academic Planning and Evaluation at Indiana University-Purdue University Indianapolis. She is the founding editor of the journal *Assessment Update*; she has published widely and is “considered a pioneer in outcomes assessment in higher education” (xxiii). Catherine Palomba is director emeritus of assessment and institutional research at Ball State University. Chapter 8 from Banta and Palomba’s book focuses on “Assessing Learning in General Education” and provides a fairly detailed overview of some of the tools institutions have used. A broad point made is that faculty are more likely to get involved in general education assessment when it is directly useful for improving the curriculum and teaching and learning, “fundamentally connected with the work they are already doing” rather than an additional time-consuming task (167). Much of the middle section of the chapter provides examples of how campuses have reviewed their general education goals and outcomes, while the last part of the chapter offers examples of how to assess specific aspects of general education programs (such as critical thinking, writing, ethical judgment, etc.).

Carpenter, Rowanna L. and Celine Fitzmaurice. "Assessment and Faculty Support: Fostering Collegial Community to Strengthen Professional Practice." *The Journal of General Education*, vol. 67 no. 1, 2018, p. 90-108. Project MUSE muse.jhu.edu/article/741687.

Rowanna Carpenter is the director of assessment and research for University Studies and Celeine Fitzmaurice a Senior Instructor of community-based learning Capstone courses at Portland State University. This article addresses how Portland State University, widely recognized as having an exemplary general ed program, has earned faculty support through providing resources and putting structures in place for general education assessment. A goal of the article is to share specific approaches for creating community across disciplines and promoting campus-wide investment in assessment. Carpenter and Fitzmaurice note that assessment process research often promotes the importance of transdisciplinary discussions around assessment, but that there isn’t much guidance about how to create and sustain it. Carpenter and Fitzmaurice specify key components of their approach: the involvement of a teaching & learning center, faculty learning communities/cohorts (as opposed to workshops) where a group of faculty works together over time, structures for faculty collaboration and conversation, support for and clear indications of the value of faculty reflecting on their teaching and on the evidence they gather about student learning. Carpenter and Fitzmaurice also share PSU’s guiding principles for faculty support and assessment (98). See Appendix 1.

Furman, Tanya. "Assessment of General Education." *The Journal of General Education*, vol. 62 no. 2, 2013, p. 129-136. *Project MUSE*, doi:10.1353/jge.2013.0020.

Tanya Furman is a professor of geosciences at Penn State University, where she served as assistant vice president and associate dean for Undergraduate Education and contributed to learning assessment initiatives. Furman compares assessment in general education programs to departmental assessment, where faculty are accustomed to working together and have structures in place that allow them to meet regularly. The contrast helps us identify some of the challenges faced by assessing general education. She surveys approaches commonly used for gen ed assessment and notes "the three domains" most often assessed are "skills in communication, numeracy, and critical thinking" (130). Furman is an advocate for supporting faculty-driven general education assessment that works across disciplines rather than keeping faculty focused on their own isolated classrooms. Other challenges in general education assessment are also addressed that can arise from the absence of a clear, defined purpose for the general education curriculum and/or the absence of a context or structure that helps students make meaningful connections across the disciplines and perspectives they are encountering in their general education coursework. Furman argues that using standardized tests to assess student learning in general education can "risk shortchanging significant and sorely needed dialogue among the faculty members, students, and administrative leaders on individual campuses nationwide" (132). She notes that faculty often tend to be disconnected from this form of data-gathering and therefore don't draw on it to improve student learning (133). In order to develop a collaborative approach to general education assessment, Furman suggests having "a series of guided conversations" with students, administrators, and faculty who teach gen ed classes to "talk about the goals, courses, and outcomes of general education" and to draw on those conversations to develop assessment processes (135).

Gerretson, Helen and Emily Golson. "Synopsis of the Use of Course-Embedded Assessment in a Medium Sized Public University's General Education Program." *The Journal of General Education*, vol. 54 no. 2, 2005, p. 139-149. *Project MUSE*, doi:10.1353/jge.2005.0020.

Helen Gerretson is a professor in the School of Mathematical Sciences and Emily Golson is a professor of English with expertise in directing writing programs, both at the University of Northern Colorado. These authors offer an example of how a course-embedded assessment approach (following Walvoord and Anderson 1995) was

implemented in a medium-sized public university, University of Northern Colorado. They review the entire process from modifying general education outcomes so that they were more easily assessed, engaging faculty in developing rubrics, and reporting findings. This would be a good, short article for faculty (or other SCORE members) to read for a focus group.

Nicholas, Mark C. and Chalmer E. Labig, Jr. "Faculty Approaches to Assessing Critical Thinking in the Humanities and the Natural and Social Sciences: Implications for General Education." *The Journal of General Education*, vol. 62, no. 4, 2013, p. 297-219. *Project Muse*, doi: 10.1353/jge.2013.0022

Mark Nicholas is the Director of Assessment at Framingham State University. Nicholas and Labig's study explores how social and natural sciences and humanities faculty assess critical thinking. Their study seeks to understand the ways general education courses assess critical thinking (CT)—as well as how these assessments represent the schools' institutional views. The authors' study, conducted at two public universities, discusses their sampling, their data collection methods and analysis, as well as examining and analyzing assignment prompts. The article provides examples of assignment prompts from various disciplines, from Psychology, Philosophy, Botany to Studio Art—and the criteria used to assess critical thinking, depending on the discipline. Nicholas and Labig provide a chart of artifacts that show how faculty have assessed critical thinking (312). Many of these were assignments such as case studies, essays, and faculty mostly rejected multiple choice tests' validity for determining critical thinking development. Their discussion explains the findings and recommends how faculty can continue to develop critical thinking measures for their general ed courses and how institutional assessment can occur. They emphasize a multidisciplinary model of critical thinking that relies on various kinds of assessment of students (rather than just one kind such as a multiple-choice test) that acknowledges the multiple intelligences students bring to the classroom. They conclude by saying that faculty need to show what critical thinking skills they wish to measure and make the "implicit explicit by using CT as an explicit learning outcome and developing and disseminating to both students and the institution the criteria they use to assess CT" (317).

Rohrbacher, Chad. "Humanities Professors' Conceptions of Assessment: A Case Study." *The Journal of General Education*, vol. 66 no. 1, 2017, p. 17-41. *Project MUSE* muse.jhu.edu/article/703254.

Chad Rohrbacher is the associate director of the Center for Teaching and Learning Excellence at Embry-Riddle Aeronautical University, Daytona Beach. This article draws

on a limited case study of humanities faculty (all full-time/tenure-track) at two institutions to make recommendations for building humanities faculty engagement with general education assessment. Rohrbacher begins by drawing on assessment research in a literature review to identify problems that undermine faculty engagement: assessment is too often driven primarily by accreditation; results/data are not reported back to departments or faculty and instead “go into space” or remain “in this star chamber of gen ed people” (35); there is tension between need for uniformity in objects being assessed and need for flexibility in teaching (31); too often “no one owns” gen ed curriculum so there is little feeling of loyalty, connection, or shared identity in terms of curriculum design and assessment (31); because of the large class sizes in gen ed, faculty might avoid teaching them (31); vague outcomes can be frustrating or difficult to assess (32); use of outcomes jargon is off-putting (32); humanities faculty can find quantitative assessment inappropriate for their fields (33); assessment can feel dictated in a top-down fashion by administration (35); the work of assessment isn’t recognized or supported (33) and faculty are unclear about its benefits to them or their teaching (34). Rohrbacher notes that at its best assessment practices can: enable faculty to talk to each other across silos about teaching (28); produce data that can help validate innovative/new pedagogical approaches (28); lead to meaningful improvements in student learning, teaching, and curriculum. Rohrbacher offers some observations and suggestions about engaging faculty. He notes that faculty perceptions of assessment have been formed from their past experiences, over time, and are often not about the current situation. It can be helpful to create space to reflect on that. Attitudes about assessment can be linked to how faculty feel students learn and demonstrate what they know (for example “transmission of knowledge” vs. “critical thinking”).

Rohrbacher thinks the “most compelling message” sent by faculty in his case study is that it should always be clear how assessment data is being used--not just in writing reports or demonstrating that an institution does assessment, but in providing useful information that is sent back to departments/faculty so they can use it, and that is clearly being used by institutions for change (35). Rohrbacher further suggests that assessment structures could be best produced by collaboration, where faculty look at the institution’s goals for general education and are asked for their ideas in deciding how we tell if courses are meeting these goals (35). Assessment work ideally links clearly with work faculty already do rather than as additional “busywork” (35). Rohrbacher asserts that institutions should consider how to support faculty ownership of general education by valuing, recognizing, and empowering gen ed teaching (36). Examples of meaningful rewards and recognition for general education teaching, assessment, and use of evidence to improve teaching include: stipends, fellowships, recognition of work as part of tenure/performance review, resources that support faculty innovation in general education teaching, encouragement and support of scholarship

that draws on general education teaching data, encouragement and support for the documentation of successful practices in general education teaching (36).

Walvoord, Barbara E. Fassler. *Assessment Clear and Simple : A Practical Guide for Institutions, Departments, and General Education*. Second ed., Jossey-Bass, a Wiley Imprint, 2010.

Barbara E. Walvoord is Professor Emerita at the University of Notre Dame, IN. She was the keynote speaker at the 2013 New England Association of Schools and Colleges conference, and visited our campus in March 2015 as a consultant on common core assessment. Walvoord's bio for the NEASC conference notes that she "has consulted or led workshops at more than 350 institutions of higher education and at many national and regional conferences, on the topics of assessment, teaching and learning, and writing across the curriculum." This is a short book that includes chapters for specific audiences: the first chapter is meant to be read by everyone; chapter 4 focuses on general education. Walvoord is a proponent of course-embedded assessment combined with some institution-wide tools as an inexpensive model that ensures faculty are invested in assessment and are using it to improve teaching and learning, which she argues should be the primary goal of assessment. She offers guidance for faculty, administrators, departments, and general education programs about the process of setting up assessment structures. She states her purpose as being to consider "how assessment can serve departmental and institutional goals--not merely external mandates--and how assessment can be conducted effectively and efficiently with ordinary peoples' available time, expertise, and resources" (1). Walvoord stresses it is important to put a sustainable assessment system in place where the information gathered is used meaningfully (rather than gathering information only for outside audiences). Chapter 4 focuses on assessing general education. Walvoord suggests keeping the system as simple as possible and only collecting data you know you will make use of. The steps include having "an overarching vision" of general education assessment, making sure the role and responsibilities of any general education committee are clearly defined (whether they will be supporting assessment processes that others enact or if they will be reviewing assessment data and making recommendations), and putting both overarching and then more specific learning goals in place. This chapter suggests different approaches for putting together shared goals and/or allowing for more autonomy within programs and courses. Walvoord asserts that whatever system of assessment is put in place, it is important to think about how information is being reported to different audiences and how that information is being acted on (how feedback loops are closed by individual faculty, department/programs, and/or general education curriculum).

Wehlburg CM. "Meaningful General Education Assessment That is Integrated and Transformative," *New Directions for Teaching & Learning*. 2010 (121):89-97. doi:10.1002/tl.391

Catherine Wehlburg is assistant provost for institutional effectiveness at Texas Christian University, with a background in educational psychology. Wehlburg recounts the problems that make general education program assessment difficult, noting many of the issues covered in Rohrbacher. Wehlburg notes that assessment of general education is a newer enterprise than assessment of other programs and of majors, and that it is unfortunately more directly linked with externally-driven accountability and accreditation. While assessment is rightly used for these external audience, Wehlburg agrees with Walvoord that the primary, meaningful use of assessment should be to inform pedagogy and agrees with Welsh and Metcalf that faculty will be more likely to support assessment efforts if they are clearly geared toward improving institutions rather than appeasing outside evaluators. Wehlburg says we should aim for what she calls transformative assessment, which is defined as "a process that is appropriate, meaningful, sustainable, flexible, and ongoing, and that uses data for improvement" (91). She argues that this form of assessment can help ensure that general education programs are fully integrated into "the overall educational ethos of the institution". A key step identified is thinking about courses in the general education program in terms of what goals they have for student learning as opposed to only thinking about them in terms of disciplinary content. Getting faculty participation in leading the development of assessment structures as well as in conducting assessment is time-consuming, difficult, but also crucial, Wehlburg argues. Wehlburg suggests that "faculty-led work groups or committees should be used to identify the outcomes for each area of the curriculum" (92). Strategies for measuring broad goals (like critical thinking) and working across disciplinary differences in how to measure these goals are suggested. Wehlburg shares "lessons learned" which includes not rushing the process, making space for dialogue and listening to many voices (including students and alumni), ensuring goals and outcomes are aligned with the university's mission statement, getting consensus from faculty around learning outcomes that clearly communicate the purpose of the general education program, making sure assessment data is being used internally, and leaving room to adjust plans and structures as you go on.