

ASSOCIATION FOR GENERAL AND LIBERAL STUDIES

2011 AGLS Awards for Improving General Education:

Using Assessment Results to Improve General Education Learning

Section #1: Contact Information of Person Submitting Application

Name	Dr. Toni L. Blum
Title	Senior Associate Dean of General Education and Assessment
Institution	Stetson University
Department/Program	College of Arts and Sciences
Street Address	421 N. Woodland Blvd.
City, State, Zip	DeLand, FL 32723
Phone	386-822-7290
Fax	386-822-7514
Email	tblum@stetson.edu
Signature	

Section #2: Institutional Endorsement

Chief Executive Officer or Chief Academic Officer

Name	Dr. Elizabeth Paul
Title	Provost and Vice President for Academic Affairs
Institution	Stetson University
Phone	386-822-7010
Fax	386-822-7253
Email	bpaul@stetson.edu
Signature	

Stetson University

Section #3: Application Summary

Stetson University, founded in 1883, is a private liberal arts university with approximately 2,200 undergraduate students. Between 2006 and 2009, Stetson completed an innovative transformation of general education, moving from a traditional distributional model to a concept-driven model. The new model was informed by the Liberal Education and America's Promise (LEAP) initiative of the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) and emphasizes an integrated and continuous progression of knowledge and skill development across students' four years at Stetson. In this application, we describe how we created and assessed the writing learning outcome of the new general education model at both formative and mastery levels and how we generated widespread collaboration across all areas of the University to improve student writing. Stetson's writing assessment represents a fully developed and implemented program that has led to significant enhancements in the curriculum, faculty development, and the culture of inquiry at the University.

Section #4: Award Criteria

Criterion 1: Supporting and Defining Learning

Stetson University is composed of a College of Arts and Sciences, College of Law, School of Music, and School of Business Administration. A hallmark of the university is the commitment to infusing the goals of liberal learning into this unique blend of arts and sciences and pre-professional programs. Stetson University's Mission statement affirms the value of "programs solidly grounded in a tradition of liberal learning that stimulates critical thinking, imaginative inquiry, creative expression, and lively intellectual debate."

In 2006, Stetson began a curricular review of its General Education Program that culminated in the adoption of a new concept-driven model in April of 2008. Rather than emphasizing specific disciplinary perspectives, general education courses are designed to meet one or more of a set of 15 liberal learning goals. Curriculum development is now tied specifically to these goals (see <http://www.stetson.edu/artsci/home/media/unitrubrics.pdf>).

Based upon these 15 learning goals, a team of 25 faculty members from across all three undergraduate units (College of Arts and Sciences, School of Music, School of Business Administration) developed 8 essential competencies or General Learning Outcomes (GLOs) during a two-day faculty workshop led by Dr. Mary Allen, author of *Assessing Academic Programs in Higher Education* and nationally recognized expert on the assessment of general education outcomes. The March 2009 workshop also included the development of a curriculum map (see http://www.stetson.edu/administration/iro/media/studentoutcomes/General_Education_Curriculum_Map.pdf) that matched each of these outcomes to areas of the general education curriculum, and identified areas from which student artifacts could be drawn for assessment. This planning workshop culminated in the creation of a timeline and draft rubrics that could begin the assessment process. Following the workshop, the General Education Assessment Committee (GEAC) was formed to implement the new general education assessment system. The 10 members of GEAC, representing faculty who teach in all competency areas across all undergraduate schools, had the task of refining the outcome statements, refining the timeline for assessing them, leading teams of faculty to further develop rubrics for each outcome, developing a process for identifying and collecting student artifacts within each outcome area, and assembling the assessment team for each of those outcomes.

Given the centrality of writing in the new general education program, it was clear to GEAC that the assessment of the writing learning outcome was an important first step in the new assessment efforts. The introduction, development, and mastery of writing skills appears at every level of the curriculum map, including two of the foundational courses (First Year Seminar and Writing), the Junior Seminar, and the capstone courses. Because we emphasize the development of writing skills across all levels of the curriculum, we could not merely take a snapshot of writing at the end of the sequence. Instead, we determined that we would assess writing at both the formative level and the mastery level.

As we do with each outcome assessment, GEAC identified two faculty members from two different units of the University to co-lead the writing assessment project. Dr. Megan O'Neill, the Director of the Writing Program, and Dr. Jane Bradford, Reference Librarian, were selected as the GEAC members to co-lead the sub-committee for this outcome. GEAC began by reviewing the draft outcome statement from the Mary Allen workshop and refined it to incorporate elements of writing that cut across perspectives and disciplines. The sub-committee co-leaders also consulted writing faculty regarding the draft outcome statement and refined the statement to reflect their recommendations. Stetson's general education learning outcome for writing is defined as follows:

Students can compose and revise written texts that employ an appropriate voice to coherently express relationships between ideas from multiple sources, illustrating awareness of rhetorical context and purpose.

GEAC then refined the rubric for assessing the writing outcome that was initially drafted during the March 2009 general education assessment workshop. The draft, three-level, analytic rubric was also reviewed by writing faculty before sharing with the faculty as a whole. The outcome statement and rubric, along with the minutes of every meeting of GEAC, were posted on an intranet website accessible by all faculty members. Notice of the availability of these documents was sent to all university faculty members. In addition, GEAC representatives within each of the three schools notified and discussed with faculty in their respective school and college meetings. In November of 2009, GEAC adopted the revised outcome statement and rubric (see rubric at <http://www.stetson.edu/artsci/writingprogram/media/AssessmentRubric.pdf>).

Next, the sub-committee co-leaders consulted the deans of all three schools for recommendations for members of the writing assessment committee. Because the mastery level of writing was identified to be in the capstone courses of each discipline, the assessment team consisted of faculty members who regularly taught those capstone courses and represented each disciplinary area of the University.

Criterion 2: Completing the Assessment Process

An important element in Stetson's approach to all general education assessment is faculty ownership and the active involvement of faculty from all areas of the University. Stetson's assessment committee for the writing outcome of general education consisted of faculty from all areas of the University. The committee was led by the writing assessment project co-leaders (a library faculty member and the director of the writing program who is a faculty member in the English Department) and included faculty members from the following academic disciplines: chemistry, creative writing, English, history, marketing, management, music, psychology, and teacher education.

The rubric was organized to examine the following components of writing:

- Awareness of Rhetorical Context
 - Purpose and unity
 - Relevance of supporting information, including sources where appropriate
 - Meeting assignment
 - Voice
- Writing Conventions
 - Mechanical
 - Disciplinary

The writing assessment committee applied the approved rubric with three evaluative levels to assess if writing samples were: 1) below expectations, 2) met expectations, or 3) exceeded expectations. A specific strength of this rubric is that it offers a holistic score as well as dimension scores on specific aspects of writing.

Stetson's assessment of writing focused on developmental as well as mastery levels by assessing artifacts from first-year students and seniors. Stetson's Institutional Research Office randomly selected 108 student names and written artifacts (68 first-year writing and 40 senior writing artifacts) were requested from the professors of those students. All first-year writing samples were selected from either ENGL 101 (the first year composition course) or FSEM 100 (the First Year Seminar). In each case, faculty members were instructed to select one essay which represents the student's best work. Senior writing samples were selected from senior research projects in the College of Arts and Sciences, from the senior capstone course in the School of Business Administration, and from recital notes of senior music majors. A small collection of sample artifacts was also collected to be used for rubric calibration purposes.

Eight members of the assessment team met for one day for rubric calibration and application. First the assessment team calibrated their use of the rubric with sample artifacts. Readers then scored the anonymous artifacts on a 0, 1, 2 scale (0 indicating "below expectations" and 2 indicating "exceeds expectations"). Each artifact was read by two evaluators. In cases where readers disagreed on whether an artifact met expectations, a third reader made the decision.

Fourteen first-year papers and seven senior papers involved splits (either exceeds/below or meets/below) that required a third reading.

Stetson's General Education Assessment Committee (GEAC) agreed prior to the assessment that the benchmarks we aim to reach would be as follows:

- *80% of the samples taken from a final portfolio writing project of a first-year level writing or first-year seminar course must be at or above Meets Expectations*
- *90% of the samples taken from the final writing product of the Senior Project must be at or above Meets Expectations.*

Although the goals of 80% and 90% were arbitrarily set by GEAC, they were deliberately set at high levels to reflect the high standards we have for our students and to reflect the increase in ability we should be able to expect from the first-year to the senior year.

Criterion 3: Analyzing Assessment Results

First-year writing assessment

Of the 54 first-year writing artifacts assessed (28 from first-year seminars; 26 from ENGL 101), 39 artifacts met or exceeded expectations (72%). This achievement, while not meeting the goal of 80 percent set by GEAC, revealed a generally satisfactory outcome as well as points for potential improvement and further University-wide discussion.

Detailed analysis of these benchmark results revealed a difference between FSEM and ENGL 101: 82% of the FSEM artifacts met or exceeded expectations, compared to 65% of the ENGL 101 artifacts. The difference in results is interesting and bears closer examination to identify specific factors contributing to an apparently higher level of success in a Writing intensive course than in a Writing course. In order to gather precisely this kind of data, readers of first year papers had been asked to score on each aspect of an analytical rubric in addition to scoring the artifacts using the holistic rubric employed across the board for mastery-level artifacts. Generating additional data in this way produced useful holistic and dimension-specific data, discussed next, that is very valuable to the Director of the Writing Program-

Ordered from most to least, the three most common deficiencies in failing FSEM papers were Supporting Information, Mechanics, and Purpose/Unity. In order, the three most common deficiencies in failing ENGL 101 papers were Purpose/Unity, Supporting Information, and Mechanics. These results are normal and expected.

However, we observed a significant difference in the “not meeting expectations” scores for Meeting Assignment (7 for FSEM, 11 for ENGL 101), which may be a result of the readers recording blanks or zeros for this criterion when clear assignment descriptions were not provided in the sample. We may need to consider the differences in assignment description techniques in first year courses to determine whether any such differences have had an impact on student writing. Because one of our rubric criteria is explicitly “meeting the assignment,” a broader discussion of what that means is in order.

Senior writing assessment

Of the 38 senior projects assessed, 29 (76%) met or exceeded expectations. Again, this achievement, while not as high as we might wish, seems respectable.

A cross-school comparison revealed that 90% of the College of Arts and Sciences senior projects met or exceeded expectations, 53% of the School of Business Administration artifacts met or exceeded expectations, and 100% of School of Music senior artifacts (a total of three) met or exceeded expectations.

Extensive discussions of these results within GEAC and with larger groups of faculty drew out some conclusions and some hypotheses to test in the next round of writing assessment. While all members of the discussions agree that the methods for selecting and assessing writing samples are sound, there was disagreement about the usefulness of the rubric tool as it stood; three levels

of achievement seemed inadequate to fully capture the ranges of quality in the student writing samples. As we explain in Criterion 4 below, we will revise the writing rubric for the second phase of assessment.

We have consistently sought to broadcast our assessment results to the University community. Opportunities for addressing University-wide faculty meetings are limited, and we have therefore used a wide range of smaller fora for presenting our results. We have continually communicated the results and sought response and engagement from our colleagues in informal gatherings, meetings of assessment team members, in department and program chair meetings, and before the Faculty Senate. GEAC has received enthusiastic response and we have confidence that further discussions of assessment efforts—and of writing assessments—will be eagerly received. As part of our result, GEAC has been able to learn not just about whether our students are learning what we hope they are learning, but also about the responsive and committed nature of our teaching faculty, each of whom is affected by these results and each of whom has a vested interest in instructional excellence.

Criterion 4: Making Improvements

The writing assessment process has driven curricular improvements and enhancements, increased faculty involvement in writing instruction across all educational programs, and helped us to understand and improve assessment processes for other general education outcomes.

First, the writing assessment identified specific curricular elements to improve: the number of writing tasks students encounter from first year to fourth, the consistency of level-appropriate writing assignments, and the coordination across the General Education curriculum of standards and expectations. Curricular revisions included launching a wide-scale program of writing-intensive courses at all levels of the General Education curriculum. While the early FSEM offerings were located primarily in the College of Arts & Sciences, we now offer FSEMs in Business as well. This new University-wide FSEM requirement, happening in the first year alongside ENGL 101, creates a writing-rich immersion experience to provide new students with a substantial introduction to learning and writing in the college atmosphere and, as a result of the FSEM design, an introduction to learning and writing in a specific discipline as well. (See complete Writing Assessment report: <http://stetson.edu/artsci/writingprogram/assessmentreports.php>)

One key feature of our assessment was the focus on **both** formative and mastery level writing. The results reaffirmed the centrality of the developmental approach to writing and spurred the approval of a “minimum competency” requirement policy for students in the Writing courses. Beginning in the Fall of 2011, students must achieve a grade of C or above in their Writing course in order to fulfill the General Education requirement.

At the junior year, students take an additional General Education course known as the Junior Seminar (JSEM), a writing-intensive course taught from within a specific discipline or program and designed to be accessible to students in other disciplines and programs. The writing pedagogy involved in the JSEM is not just a writing-to-learn approach but a writing-to-communicate approach, and it has taken a rich variety of shapes depending on the faculty member and his or her specific discipline. As a result of implementing the JSEM requirement across the campus, we now have three Writing or Writing-intensive courses expected of all students as part of our General Education curriculum. The goal of this implementation is to provide students with consistent practice in writing at the college level prior to the senior or mastery projects that are required across all majors and programs. (See here for our resources on Writing-intensive courses: <http://stetson.edu/artsci/writingprogram/writingintensivecourses.php>)

Next, faculty involvement in the assessment of writing and its improvement has been both broad and deep. The initial assessment was performed by faculty from all areas on the campus (including Marketing, Chemistry, History, Music, Management, English, Creative Writing, and Psychology). Subsequent University-wide curricular and programmatic improvement has involved leadership from all three academic units and has been driven by the faculty who teach general education courses. For example, the leaders of the FSEM and JSEM curricular requirements, along with the faculty who teach in those programs, have each contributed shaping

ideas to the curricular improvement. Communication Studies, History, Chemistry, Theater, and English FSEM and JSEM faculty have joined in workshops with faculty in Accounting, Decision Science, Marketing, and Music to ensure a depth and consistency in these Gen Ed expectations for both Arts & Sciences and in Business. Much of the initial impetus for writing assessment and reform came from the Writing Program, but it is the willingness and insights of the faculty at large that have made these curricular improvements take life and shape in the Stetson General Education Program.

Administrative support for faculty involvement has been consistent and significant. This support ranges from routine examples such as arranging for meals at assessment sessions to high level initiatives such as a newly appointed Associate Provost for Faculty Development and a Dean of General Education and Assessment. These new positions have been integral in supporting the development of teaching in many areas, most critically in the coordination of workshops and seminars to support curricular enhancement. For example, faculty development activities led to substantial, university-wide faculty discussion of high-impact learning strategies employed in Writing Across the Curriculum (WAC) and Writing in the Disciplines (WID) courses. Active learning strategies involving writing include the “minute” essay, responses to and syntheses of readings, inquiry assignments, and exploratory essays and proposals culminating in substantial, inquiry-driven research. Faculty development workshops and seminars for the last two years have enjoyed a healthy attendance; discussions of specific strategies, sharing assignment tactics and grading expectations, and developing departmental and disciplinary rubrics for project assessment have helped to focus sharper attention on the role of learning in the writing process at all four years of our curriculum. (See here for some of the assignment resources available for our faculty: <http://stetson.edu/artsci/writingprogram/WIwritingassns.php>).

Finally, the assessment process has enhanced the culture of inquiry regarding student learning outcomes at the University. As we approach the midway point between writing assessment cycles, we have taken into account the response of our cross-University assessment team as we revise the rubric we originally used, although we remain confident in our outcome statement as it stands. The initial rubric, with multiple criteria but only three levels of achievement, was only satisfactory for our purposes; faculty involved in the rubric development and the assessment itself offered feedback that, regardless of discipline, confirmed our decision to revise that rubric to four levels of achievement. These refinements allow for a finer degree of judgment in our assessments and thus produce greater amounts of more useful data points.

While the writing assessment taught us a lot about student abilities, a result that was in some ways more rewarding was our learning that faculty at Stetson are deeply invested in their students’ writing—and often unsure, campus-wide, about how to improve their students’ learning through writing. The tendency across campus has been to use writing to evaluate student learning, with somewhat less attention on using writing to facilitate that learning. That realization has spurred a far more involving conversation about our teaching and a series of revelations for some faculty in their planning of writing activities; rather than using writing to measure, faculty in Sciences, some Business classes, and some Music courses are beginning to use writing to shape and form their students’ learning. As we continue the conversations and the workshops, new tactics and teaching strategies will develop to create an upward loop of improvement.