



The AGLS General Education Leader’s Playbook

WHY DO WE ASSESS GEN ED?

<p><i>Who might ask this question?</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Faculty at all levels • Department Heads • Administration • Admission Offices 	<p><i>Who might have an answer to this question?</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Accreditors • University Leadership • Institutional Effectiveness • Department Heads • Instructors
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THE BUZZER-BEATER: WHEN YOU NEED ONE PLAY FOR THE WIN

Most fundamentally, we conduct assessment to understand what, how, and how much students are learning as a result of General Education programs. We complete cycles of assessment by determining whether the changes we implement to improve learning indeed do so.

This cycle is familiar to and practiced by instructors within their own courses; program-level assessment allows us to engage in the process collaboratively throughout the General Education curriculum using standardized, reliable, and validated methodologies. General Education is a team sport, and programmatic assessment allows us to measure the impact on student learning of the individual team player (the instructor/course) and how student learning is shaped by the entire team (the program). Assessment serves as a vehicle for discussions, conversations, and sharing about student growth among team members.

What assessment is not: We are not trying to “prove” that students are meeting the learning outcomes for the program nor that faculty are doing their jobs. Accreditation is not the fundamental reason for assessment, but a requirement easily met by quality assessment designed to foster continuous improvement.

Play 1: ASSESS FOR STUDENT LEARNING EVALUATION AND IMPROVEMENT

A data-enriched understanding of student learning permits us to identify changes to instruction and curricula that might improve that learning. We collect empirical evidence to understand the degree to which students gain the knowledge and skills specified in the program outcomes, with the goal of continuous improvement to courses and programs that enhances student learning. Examining data at various levels (aggregated, or disaggregated by cohort, major, or individual) allows for a more nuanced understanding of student mastery and can play a key role in the discovery of inequities in achievement and access across student groups.

Play 2: ASSESS FOR COURSE-LEVEL EVALUATION AND IMPROVEMENT

Sound assessment practices can improve courses and course design and help align course competencies

and objectives to common outcomes. Moreover, assessment provides faculty with an opportunity to reflect upon and improve teaching and learning, promote instructional quality and innovation, and share successful methods, approaches, strategies, and tactics by, cultivating community conversations. Such facilitated community dialogue can especially effective for multi-section courses. Given that disciplinary knowledge is not static, and economic, social, environmental, and cultural conditions rapidly shift with a deepening awareness of the importance of equity and inclusion necessitate an ongoing assessment of course curriculum and design.

Assessment should be, as much as anything else, a faculty-driven process of intellectual and pedagogical inquiry aligned with faculty self-interest in improving their own teaching and courses. Sound assessment practices engage faculty in thoughtful conversations about what works best to improve their courses and, by extension, student learning.

Play 3: ASSESS FOR PROGRAM EVALUATION AND IMPROVEMENT

We evaluate and assess General Education to identify areas of strength in student learning, skills, and achievement and to uncover areas in need of improvement across individuals. The assessment of the Gen Ed program must permit discovery of inequities in assessment, achievement, and access across student groups. The assessment results may suggest areas in need of supplemented resources, staffing, or redesign.

Play 4: ASSESS FOR EXTERNAL AND INTERNAL ACCOUNTABILITY AND COMMUNICATION

Yes, we assess general education programs because we must for regional and state accreditation requirements and to satisfy institutional program reporting requirements. However, we are not only accountable to governing boards and agencies, but we are also accountable to our institutional stakeholders which include students, alumni, parents, the community, and in the case of public institutions, the taxpayers. By collecting and reporting general education program data, we hold ourselves accountable for developing, constantly improving, and delivering the curricular outcomes, program values, and institutional mission promised to every graduate of the institution.

CHAPTER TWO PROMPT WORKSHEET

Every sport is based on basic moves and strategies that make up the game. Every coach has favorite plays to turn to in certain moments or suited to the team's strengths. Each play is often customized for optimum effect on the field of play.

Pages 1 & 2 of chapter 2 are a set of stock responses for you to use as needed – created from input from gen ed colleagues around the U.S. This page is designed to help you think about, create, or customize responses for the next time you are asked ‘why do we assess general education?’ Use the questions below as your prompt. Spend some time thinking about and creating responses that are customized to unique features of and approaches found in your campus’ general education program.

- Here is the big question for any assessment effort – how do you know that what you are doing is working? How do you currently answer this question when asked, how do you know gen ed is working on campus?

- Faculty are often asked to develop a statement about their teaching, using a metaphor to frame their approach to what they do in the classroom. That technique, developing a metaphor, is useful in any situation where you must answer a high-level question like how do you view assessment efforts on campus or in your classroom. What is your metaphor? Is assessment an exercise in curiosity? Research? Applied work? A problem to solve? A creative endeavor? Scholarly effort for possible public consumption? Do you approach assessment in a frame of mind that is more STEM-like or humanities-like?
- Reactions to assessment often range from resigned indifference to visceral disdain across campus. Getting buy-in from faculty can be difficult, but most do it as it is required by the department, school, administration, higher education commission or accreditor. What are the methods you currently use to get actual commitment to assessment efforts (beyond simple buy-in)? Do you adapt strategies for working with diverse faculty audiences on campus? E.G., different approaches for STEM versus liberal arts faculty, or engineering versus music school?
- Do you acknowledge units that do assessment well? Have any been recognized or praised for their efforts by outside stakeholders? Are creative methods or tools used by a unit shared across campus to give struggling units ideas for their own efforts? Do you work with successful units to create a good, basic template for other units to adopt or adapt?
- Assessment requires a team of people (department, school, discipline, etc.) to collect and make sense of the data that is collected. Team cohesion building around the assessment undertaking can be key to its success. How do you team-build when you ask a group to undertake an assessment project? Do you create moments of fun? Celebration? Share the results in a creative way (the good, bad, and ugly)? What might be ways you can ‘reward’ the team working on assessment?

- How do you balance the strengths and weaknesses of the individual players (usually the faculty in the classroom) and the strengths and weaknesses of the team (the program, department, etc.)?

- Assessment efforts on campus tend to be cyclical. Outside forces often are the driving force behind efforts. How does your gen ed program answer these questions:
 - ✓ What forces are expected periodically? What forces could prompt an initiation of a cycle?
 - ✓ What is the duration between assessment cycles (if any)?
 - ✓ Have you done any research on what are the minimal requirements for accreditation or other purposes?
 - ✓ How do you decide what to assess in any particular cycle?
 - ✓ Do you require a multilevel strategy for assessment, including processes for your macro (broad) question(s) as well as micro (specific) question(s)?
 - ✓ Do you break down the cycle into stages? What forms, templates, etc. do you create or use for each stage of the cycle?
 - ✓ Do you ask for similar data from differing units for comparison, or a broad perspective of the achievement of learning outcomes across campus?

- How do you maintain commitment and/or buy-in to keep the work going beyond a single cycle? Have you achieved the ultimate goal of assessment nirvana? Do faculty continuously collect data and use it for improvement?

- It is extremely important in any assessment work to ‘close the loop,’ acting on data and evidence to continuously improve the program. Do you communicate that clearly to faculty participating?

- Assessment does not always yield positive results. Do you have a method to show how your gen ed program is doing on campus? What kind of indicators do you use to show success! We are doing OK, but it could be better. Ugh, we need improvement. What is your ‘traffic light’ of assessment – how do you indicate if you are hitting desired benchmarks? What are your green, yellow and red lights?
- How do you get faculty to talk about benchmarks? This includes the creation of rubrics, so you know if you are hitting your benchmark goals. How flexible are those benchmarks and rubrics as one size rarely fits all?
- Assessment efforts are worth the effort to make changes and improve learning outcomes. What are the sticky points of your assessment efforts? What have you previously done to address them? Are there suggestions that have been put aside but may be worthy of a second look?

The responses and ideas here are not definitive. They are offered as a basis to create your own responses and ready to use materials. Of course, each time you are asked this question – your answer should be specific to their concerns, which sometimes may not be what they are asking. By having on hand a set of prepared statements to serve as the foundation of a useful response, your job as a gen ed administrator will become easier.

ADVANCE PLAYS: This worksheet is designed to help you develop responses to the question posed. The next step may be to delineate some strategies to increase the commitment of faculty, staff and administration make to the assessment and continuous improvement of general education. You want them to be your champions of gen ed, being able to answer the question this chapter poses. Once you have completed this chapter, consider what strategies might be effective at your institution to nurture the commitment of your team of gen ed champions to ongoing assessment.

Keep copies of your customized ‘plays’ for CHAPTER 2 in your gen ed playbook with this chapter.

ALL ASSESSMENT IS A PERPETUAL WORK IN PROGRESS.

~ Linda Suskie