**Assessment of Student Learning in General Education**

**Fall 2015 Results**

The NJCU General Education program assesses student achievement of the six University-wide student learning goals. Each course includes instruction in, and assessment of, two of these learning goals, requiring students to complete end-of-semester signature assignments that demonstrate achievement of the covered learning goals. The program utilizes the Tk20 website to collect “signature” assignments uploaded by students. These assignments are distributed to assessment team members who score them using the appropriate General Education rubrics. While assessment team rubric scores do not impact grades, signature assignments are also graded by course instructors and contribute to the final course grades determined by instructors.

The assessment report provides the results of Fall 2015 assessment activities, in which three of the six University-wide student learning goals were assessed: Critical Thinking and Problem-Solving, Oral Communication, and Written Communication. The present document includes a summary of key findings. Detailed assessment data for each learning goal, observations and reflections, and qualitative feedback from assessment team members and General Education faculty are available in the full report accessible via the General Education Assessment link on GothicNet.

The key findings of Fall 2015 programmatic assessment of General Education are that student achievement of the outcomes associated with Critical Thinking and Problem-Solving, Oral Communication, and Written Communication is, on average, relatively close, although there are significant differences in achievement among the specific outcomes (dimensions) for each learning goal. These indicate a need for increased attention to certain aspects of each of the learning goals on which students performed less well. In other words, there are important variations within the overall findings that must inform collective efforts to improve student learning in General Education courses at NJCU.

**Tier 1 Overview**

The first three tables below show how many students in Tier 1 courses achieved the Tier 1 level of proficiency, fell below the Tier 1 level, and fell below Benchmark for the three learning goals assessed in Fall 2015. Note that the percentage “Below Benchmark” is also included in the percentage “Below Tier 1” (which explains why the total of each row adds up to more than 100%):

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Critical Thinking, Tier 1** | | | |
|  | Tier 1 or Above | Below Tier 1 | Below Benchmark  (Also counted in “Below Tier 1”) |
| Average Across Dimensions | 58% | 42% | 8% |
|  |  |  |  |
| **Oral Communication, Tier 1** | | | |
|  | Tier 1 or Above | Below Tier 1 | Below Benchmark  (Also counted in “Below Tier 1”) |
| Average Across Dimensions | 60% | 40% | 20% |
|  |  |  |  |
| **Written Communication, Tier 1** | | |  |
|  | Tier 1 or Above | Below Tier 1 | Below Benchmark  (Also counted in “Below Tier 1”) |
| Average Across Dimensions | 58% | 42% | 6% |

The above data provide a general sense of the overall picture for Tier 1 courses. Since this is the first semester of the program, we have no comparative data; however, a common target for this type of assessment is 80%. Based on assessment team evaluations, and averaging all the dimensions, students in Tier 1 classes achieved the Tier 1 level of proficiency on signature assignments 58-60% of the time across all three learning goals.

Although achievement was generally comparable across the three learning goals in Tier 1, a large percentage of students (20%) fell below the benchmark (that is, fell below “beginning college level”) in Oral Communication. This is considerably more than the 6-8% under benchmark for Written Communication and Critical Thinking.

When all three learning goals are averaged together, 62% of students in Tier 1 and Tier 2 classes achieved the Tier 1 proficiency level. It would seem unlikely for first-semester college students to achieve Tier 2-levels, even in Tier 2 classes. Therefore, Tier 1 outcomes may have been a reasonable goal for all General Education students, given that they had no previous college-level experience (transfer students were not enrolled in General Education courses in Fall 2015) in the first semester of the program.

**Tier 2 Overview**

Students in Tier 2 classes were somewhat more likely to meet Tier 2 standards than students in Tier 1 courses. However, students in Tier 2 courses did not meet Tier 2 standards at a high rate.

The following tables provide a general picture of the Tier 2 results. Due to the small number of Fall 2015 classes that assessed Oral Communication in Tier 2, only Tier 1 Oral Communication data are provided in this report. Note that the percentage “Below Benchmark” is also included in the percentage for “Below Tier 2” (which explains why the total of each row adds up to more than 100%):

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Critical Thinking, Tier 2** | | | |
|  | Tier 2 or Above | Below Tier 2 | Below Benchmark  (Also counted in “Below Tier 2”) |
| Average Across Dimensions | 29% | 71% | 5% |
|  |  |  |  |
| **Written Communication, Tier 2** | | | |
|  | Tier 2 or Above | Below Tier 2 | Below Benchmark  (Also counted in “Below Tier 2”) |
| Average Across Dimensions | 19% | 81% | 5% |

These tables show that 19%-29% of students in Tier 2 courses achieved the Tier 2 outcomes in Fall 2015. Interestingly, students in Tier 2 courses did slightly better at meeting Tier 1 Critical Thinking standards than students in Tier 1 courses (by about 4%); yet students in Tier 2 courses did *a lot* better (by 25%) at meeting Tier 1 Written Communication standards.

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | **Critical Thinking** | | **Written Communication** | |
|  | Tier 1 Level Achieved | Tier 2 Level Achieved | Tier 1 Level Achieved | Tier 2 Level Achieved |
| **Tier 1 Classes** | 58% | 13% | 58% | 9% |
| **Tier 2 Classes** | 62% | 29% | 83% | 19% |

Students in Tier 2 classes did 16% better than their Tier 1 counterparts at meeting Tier 2 Critical Thinking standards; and students in Tier 2 classes did 10% better than their Tier 1 counterparts at meeting Tier 2 Written Communication standards. Given the Tier 1 and 2 distribution requirements in effect in Fall 2015, it is likely that most students in Tier 2 classes had placed into college-level composition courses in their first semester of college. However, even these presumably stronger writers were unlikely to have achieved Tier 2 Written Communication outcomes by the end of the first semester of college.

The achievement rates of students on signature assignments in Fall 2015 must be seen in light of the fact that Fall 2015 was the first semester of General Education program implementation and assessment, and that all students who submitted signature assignments, in both Tier 1 and Tier 2 classes, were first-semester freshmen. In addition, it is relevant to consider that NJCU Honors students take an alternative set of courses outside the regular Gen Ed program; as a result, their presumably stronger outcomes are not included in these results (though Business Honors students do take Gen Ed courses so their scores are included).

In addition to addressing the main issue of student achievement of the learning goals, there are a number of practical, logistical, and procedural issues to be addressed, including a low (46%) signature assignment submission rate. The submission rate is a percentage of the total number of signature assignments that would have been submitted if all students enrolled in every General Education course had submitted two signature assignments, one for each of the two learning goals covered in each of their courses. Improving the submission rate must be a priority in future semesters.

Another key finding of this report is that essential work remains to be done to improve inter-rater reliability. Perfect juror agreement (among jurors who scored the same assignments) was achieved on average across the seven dimensions of Critical Thinking (Tiers 1 and 2) 28%-37% of the time; for Oral Communication (Tier 1 only) the range for perfect agreement was 35%-58%; and for Written Communication, the range for perfect agreement was 30%-43%. While across-the-board achievement of perfect agreement is unrealistic, it is not unreasonable to expect that continued assessment practice, as well as reflection and communication, will have a positive impact on future results. The forthcoming action plan must address ways of improving juror agreement numbers in future semesters.

That said, perhaps the following is somewhat hopeful for the first semester of implementation: juror pairs reported scores *within one point of each other* (on a 5-point scale ranging from 0-4) about 70-90% of the time for every dimension of all three learning goals except “Supporting Material” under Tier 1 Oral Communication. In fact, the average juror agreement *within one point* across Tiers 1 and 2 was 82% for Critical Thinking; 84% for Written Communication; and 69% for Oral Communication—and that went up to 73% if the outlier “Supporting Materials” were excluded (“Supporting Materials” had by far the lowest juror agreement at 54%). While these inter-rater reliability results are certainly far from ideal, they do provide a clear starting point from which to improve.

Already, a number of steps have been taken to increase student submission rates in Spring 2016. General Education faculty have been asked to require students to submit completed signature assignments for grading exclusively via Tk20, which will therefore serve as the collection site for both instructors and the assessment team. Instructors will download their students’ assignments directly from Tk20 for grading. In addition, the submission form used in Fall 2015 has been eliminated; students are now asked to include the assignment question/prompt provided by their instructors at the beginning/top of their submission files. This approach simplifies the submission process and should also improve submission rates.

Student submission of signature assignments is also being supported by a campaign to increase faculty and student awareness of the submission process. Training for General Education students and instructors is being provided, and navigation guides for students, faculty, and assessment team members are being made available via email and GothicNet. These and other resources have also been posted on the General Education website: [www.njcu.edu/gened](http://www.njcu.edu/gened). In addition, during the end-of-semester submission period, students and faculty are invited to approximately 40 hours of computer lab drop-in sessions for assistance with video compression (for oral presentations) and signature assignment file uploading for all types of assignments. General Education instructors are invited to attend these sessions with their classes.

Increasing the student submission rate could have a significant impact on future assessment results. While we do not know whether an improved submission rate will raise or lower student achievement rates, we do know that a better response rate will improve the quality of the assessment data. This is an important goal as better data will provide better information on which to base future curricular and pedagogical improvements.

Addressing the response rate and improving assignment design are two essential steps indicated by these results; as the University community has an opportunity to reflect on them, we hope to help initiate a wider conversation about student learning at NJCU. Our immediate focus will be to consider what additional activities and adjustments are called for in response to these results. As mentioned above, an action plan will be developed to improve submission and inter-rater reliability rates, and especially to improve student achievement of the learning outcomes. The latter will likely involve the planning of programs to address pedagogical practices and support faculty and students to meet teaching and learning challenges. A few of the many possibilities include targeted faculty development workshops, organized around specific outcomes (dimensions of the learning goals), and the development of student support strategies—within and outside the classroom—explicitly designed to address areas of weakness identified in these results. In addition, we will work to ensure that future assessment activities are developed to track progress on the highest priority areas of concern. Among decisions to be made will be which learning goals to assess in Fall 2016 and Spring of 2017. The feasibility of signature assignment collection and review for the Summer sessions also remains to be determined.

These assessment results, as well as qualitative feedback collected from a number of constituencies, have already begun to inform plans for faculty development. Submitted signature assignment prompts, and the high percentage of NAs (not applicable) assigned among the dimensions/outcomes (indicating that an assignment question/prompt did not require demonstration of a given dimension/outcome), in addition to comments from instructors, assessment team members, and the members of GEEC and GECAP, who reviewed signature assignments submitted by instructors in Fall 2015 and Spring 2016, respectively, have revealed a pressing need for faculty development in the area of assignment design, which we know can be an important factor contributing to student success.

The GECAP will continue its periodic review of signature assignments and provide instructors with feedback to help ensure that signature assignments may be scored by the appropriate rubrics. In addition, we have planned a faculty development workshop focused on a powerful research-based approach to assignment design that demonstrably improves student success. Presented by Dr. Mary-Ann Winkelmes of the University of Nevada, Las Vegas, the workshop on “Transparent Assignment Design” will take place on April 29 from 1-2:30 in GSU 129. Transparent assignment design has been shown to have a significant impact on student achievement, especially for underserved and first-generation students. Participation via Webcast will be available so that physical presence on campus is not required. In addition, a recording of the workshop will be made available to faculty members who are unable to attend. All faculty are welcome; General Education faculty are especially encouraged to attend.

As stated above, an action plan will be developed to address key findings and improve upon these results through faculty development, pedagogical refinement, and curricular revision. Assessment results will thus inform improvements to the new General Education program that positively impact student learning. These and future results should also be used to identify areas of strength among our students, and to adopt a positive approach that seeks to build on our collective strengths as educators. We hope that, as the University community has an opportunity to review these results, more people will become involved in a discussion about teaching and learning at NJCU, in the General Education program and beyond. What works? How can we grow and improve? How can we best help our students do the same?

Ongoing assessment of student learning can become a collective process of self-discovery in which our own learning directly benefits our students. In this regard, it could be especially helpful to increase Gen Ed faculty participation in programmatic assessment activities. We hope you will join us in this endeavor.

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