

Assessment *in* Practice

Assessment with Benefits: Faculty Engagement and Community Building through GE Assessment

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July 2018

INTRODUCTION

Like many institutions, California State University, Fullerton (CSUF), a large public comprehensive university in Southern California, has struggled with how to engage faculty in a meaningful and sustainable manner in program-level student learning assessment, and how to make this effort beneficial to all stakeholders (students, faculty and the institution). It is particularly challenging when it comes to assessing the General Education (GE) program, which requires engaging faculty—particularly adjunct faculty—from multiple disciplines.

Over the last few years, CSUF developed and implemented a promising GE assessment model—the “GE Faculty Learning Community”—to address the aforementioned challenge. What makes this model successful, we believe, is that it strengthens the connection among assessment, teaching and learning, engages faculty from diverse disciplines through collaborative community-building activities, fosters faculty professional development in pedagogy and curriculum, and ultimately facilitates positive, fundamental changes in the campus’ understanding and culture of assessment. We share in this article our journey that led us to this GE assessment model.

INSTITUTIONAL CONTEXT

CSUF is one of the universities within the 23-campus California State University (CSU) system. Currently offering 109 degree programs and enrolling over 40,000 students, CSUF is one of the largest CSU campuses. CSUF takes pride in its rich diversity—according to U.S. Department of Education

data, CSUF ranks fifth in the nation in Baccalaureate degrees awarded to underrepresented students, and ranks No. 1 in California and second in the nation in awarding degrees to Hispanics (CSUF Rankings, 2017). Among the 270,000 plus degrees CSUF has awarded, more than half are earned by first generation college students. *US News and World Reports* has ranked CSUF among the top National Universities since 2016, and its September 2017 report ranked CSUF as one of the “Most Innovative Schools.”

Institutional accomplishments aside, the primary concerns for assessment at CSUF are similar to other institutions—how do we engage over-worked, underpaid faculty in innovative teaching and learning practices to improve student learning? Many faculty at CSUF teach four courses per semester, engage in scholarly research, and participate in campus and professional service (of which assessment is only one option). While faculty often do not object to the concept of assessment, they feel strongly against having “another thing” added to their plate. As such, we have been mindful of advocating for *embedded, sustainable* assessment practices on campus. At the same time, we have also been intentional in helping faculty see assessment as *meaningful* by highlighting the connections between assessment and faculty’s everyday instructional practices. In other words, faculty need to have direct experience in conducting assessment in their own courses; and departments need to have hands-on exposure to how assessment efforts could inform curriculum cohesion and planning.

Currently at CSUF, students are required to take 51 units in GE. With more than 40,000 students, there are over 500 GE courses, and more than 2,000 course sections. These courses are taught by more than 800 faculty, the majority of whom are part-time. As it is a foundational part of student learning, GE should be subjected to the same rigorous assessment process as a regular degree program. However, GE assessment faces additional difficulties such as the lack of faculty ownership or coordination (Bresciani, 2006), and the high proportion of part-time faculty who are not expected to take on duties beyond teaching courses (Allen, 2006). As such, it is particularly challenging to motivate faculty to engage in GE assessment, or to create a structure that effectively coordinates this effort across the disciplines.

OUR FIRST ATTEMPT

Our initial efforts at GE assessment yielded mixed results. Faculty, through the University Academic Senate GE committee, led the task of developing a set of university-wide GE learning goals and outcomes, which were approved in Spring 2015. These GE learning goals and outcomes were then disseminated to the departments, who completed a curriculum mapping exercise that identified the GE learning goals addressed by each GE course. With the foundation of GE assessment established, the Senate GE Committee piloted a GE assessment plan on one of the GE learning goals. Mindful of the faculty workload issue, the committee chose four GE courses from different disciplines. The instructors were asked to identify one course assignment that demonstrated student learning of the chosen learning goal, and to submit the aggregated results from their courses at the end of the year. The committee also administered a one-question micro-survey to students enrolled in these four courses as indirect assessment. While

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students self-reported positive learning gains in these courses, only one course submitted the direct assessment data. The instructors reported that they were confused about the purpose of data collection and frustrated with the process, and thus chose not to participate.

Pat Hutchings (2010) in her insightful essay, *Opening Doors to Faculty Involvement in Assessment*, laid out six recommendations for faculty engagement. Our first attempt at GE assessment failed precisely because it violated these recommendations. For example, it did not “build assessment around the regular, ongoing work of teaching and learning (p.13), did not build in faculty development, and did not meaningfully engage the course instructors in the process. The process did not “create campus spaces and occasions for constructive assessment conversation and action” (p.15), and thus did not align the effort with the collaborative inquiry that faculty are familiar and comfortable with (Hersh & Keeling, 2013).

WHAT WE TRIED NEXT

Learning from our initial attempt, we prioritized meaningfulness, in addition to sustainability, in our new GE assessment model, which engages faculty from beginning to end, not just during the data collection phase. The GE Faculty Learning Community (FLC) hence is designed to focus on clear connections between assessment and “regular, ongoing work of teaching and learning” (Hutchings, 2010, p.13).

A group of faculty from multiple disciplines who teach GE courses that share a common GE learning goal forms the basis of the FLC. A dedicated assessment professional serves as the coordinator for the FLC. Each year, a different FLC is established to tackle one GE learning goal. At the beginning of the fall semester, the FLC coordinator works with the Academic Senate GE Committee to choose the GE learning goal of focus for the year. The Provost works with the college Deans to identify appropriate GE courses for GE assessment. The faculty who are identified by the colleges as the course leads (regardless of their tenure, full-time/part-time status) then form the GE FLC to work collaboratively to develop and implement GE assessment plans. The FLC goes through a series of working meetings (which also serve as professional development opportunities) in the fall semester to develop comparable course-embedded assignments, create a common rubric, and complete rubric calibration. In the spring semester, the course-leads train the instructors who teach other sections of the course on the use of the assignment and rubric. Student performance data are collected in late spring, facilitated by the FLC coordinator. Data analysis, interpretation and improvement planning take place in the summer. The FLC members are expected to disseminate the assessment findings to their colleagues to promote campus awareness and to encourage faculty participation in future rounds of assessment. A sample timeline of the FLC is illustrated in Figure 1.

Details on past and current iterations of the GE assessment FLC can be found on the CSUF website: http://www.fullerton.edu/data/assessment/assessment_at_csuf/general_edu_assessment.php



Figure 1. GE FLC Sample Timeline

For example, the GE FLC in 2016-2017 consisted of 15 faculty across disciplines, including 9 tenured/tenure-track faculty, 2 full-time lecturers and 4 part-time faculty. They worked closely throughout the year to define the GE learning goal *Critical Thinking*, revise course-embedded assignments, develop a shared scoring rubric, and apply it to assess student *Critical Thinking* skill development as a result of the GE program. The FLC also collectively developed student survey questions to gauge students' self-perception of *Critical Thinking* skills as a source of indirect assessment. Our results suggested positive student skill development, with over 70% of students performing at the level of "proficient" or "advanced" on every criterion of the rubric, and over 90% of students self-reporting as having competency in *Critical Thinking* skills.

While the positive assessment findings are encouraging, perhaps what is more exciting is the success of FLC in engaging faculty from diverse background (e.g. disciplines, tenure status, faculty rank), who often are resistant to program-level learning assessment. We observed various types of faculty development in and outside the FLC meetings, including deeper reflection on assignment design, joint effort in rubric development, and renewed understanding of other disciplines' perspectives. One faculty commented in an anonymous survey: "This was very informative and helped me to view my students' results as an objective endeavor and gave me a nice distance to view them." Faculty also reported a positive experience in the FLC—attributing it largely to FLC's ability to promote collegiality, collaboration, and cross-disciplinary open discussions. For example, one faculty said that the highlight of the process was "Collaboration and hearing multiple voices; collegiality and collective wisdom. I sensed that we were all invested in the process." Additionally, the FLC provided a platform for adjunct faculty to contribute equally to an important university initiative and to feel valued and included. With adjunct faculty teaching an increasingly large percentage of GE courses each year, the effectiveness of the GE FLC in engaging them in teaching and learning discussions is particularly encouraging. In sum, these "unintended side-effects" on faculty development and engagement are perhaps the most significant gains of this new GE assessment model.

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MOVING FORWARD

The 2016-2017 GE FLC successfully collected meaningful assessment data from over 2000 students across 15 diverse disciplines, with funding support from the Provost's Office. The approximately \$10,000 budget was used nearly entirely for faculty stipends (\$500 for each course lead, and \$100 for the instructors who taught other sections of the same course), which is quite modest considering the amount of work required of them. The success of the 2016-2017 GE FLC allowed us to secure ongoing funding to sustain this effort. Our current plan is to assess one GE Learning Goal per year through the GE FLC model. In fact, the 2017-2018 FLC is in full swing, with the focus of assessing student *Teamwork* abilities.

With the paradigm shift in teaching and learning models, the emergence of new technologies, the challenge of educating a new and diverse student population, and the public concern over the quality and value of higher education, the importance of faculty engagement in curricular revision, pedagogical improvement, and student learning assessment is abundantly clear. CSUF, with a large number of its courses taught by adjunct faculty, share many similar challenges as other institutions in how to meaningfully involve faculty in university-wide assessment efforts. Our preliminary success of the GE FLC model presents a promising solution in addressing such challenges. Faculty involved with the FLC develop expertise and interest in assessment that helps fuel assessment efforts associated with their major degree programs. For assessment to be engaging, meaningful and sustainable, it needs to go beyond meeting external compliance demands, and become fully grounded in regular teaching and learning practices.

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Please Cite As:

Swarat, S., & Wrynn, A. M. (2018, July). *Assessment with benefits: Faculty engagement and community building through GE assessment*. Urbana, IL: University of Illinois and Indiana University, National Institute for Learning Outcomes Assessment (NILOA).

About NILOA

- The National Institute for Learning Outcomes Assessment (NILOA) was established in December 2008, and is co-located at the University of Illinois and Indiana University.
- The NILOA website contains free assessment resources and can be found at <http://www.learningoutcomesassessment.org>.
- The NILOA research team has scanned institutional websites, surveyed chief academic officers, and commissioned a series of occasional papers.

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