

Case Study: A Sustainable Model for Assessing General Education

Overview of this Case Study

The development of a sustainable assessment process for a core undergraduate curriculum can be a complex and onerous undertaking, yet it is a common institutional priority, as regional accrediting bodies are increasingly focused on both the sustainability of assessment processes and the demonstrated use of data to improve the curriculum.

This case study will describe the assessment plan and process for General Education at Simmons College in Boston, MA; this plan has been found to be highly sustainable through clear processes, accountability, and broad engagement; the plan is also closely integrated with and informs continuous, meaningful curricular improvement.

Later sections of this module will analyze the role that different components of this process play in sustainability, how these components were initially developed, an overview of the annual cycle of planning and implementation, and how the process is managed, maintained, and assessed.

Brief Overview of the PLAN Curriculum

The Simmons undergraduate core curriculum, known as the Simmons PLAN (Purpose, Leadership, and Action), was launched in fall 2015 and includes six *Essential Capabilities* at the core of the program and four *Key Content Areas*. The curriculum includes four common required courses (one of which spans three semesters and one of which is an 8-credit learning community), a distribution requirement, a student-designed interdisciplinary area of focus across three courses, a capstone in the major, and language and quantitative literacy requirements.

Overview of PLAN Assessment Method

The assessment of PLAN includes both formative and summative data, and both direct and indirect data. This data is reviewed and used by multiple stakeholders for continuous curricular improvement.

Direct Summative Data

Direct assessment of student learning in PLAN is course-embedded and aligned with the six Essential Capabilities. Table 1 demonstrates how these are aligned.

Table 1: Assessment in the PLAN Curriculum

Essential Capabilities	Communication	Critical Thinking and Creative Problem Solving	Data Analysis and Interpretation	Ethical Leadership	Integrative Learning	Navigation of Cultural Differences
Simmons Course	X			X		X
Boston Course	X	X				

Leadership Course	X			X		X
Language Requirement	X					
Quantitative Literacy		X	X			
Learning Community	X	X			X	
3D Cluster	X				X	
Capstone	X	X	X			

For each of the required courses, a working group comprised of a Course Lead, the General Education director, the Director of the Center for Excellence in Teaching, and key faculty and staff with experience related to the course content are convened. This working group, through a structured, facilitated workshop, creates common student learning objectives (LOs) for the course and common course assignments to assess those objectives. The common LOs had to address the Essential Capabilities assigned to the course on the curriculum map, and the common assignment(s) had to be designed to assess the common LOs (extensive mapping was completed for each course).

Each June, a sub-set of the course working groups attend a regional, 2-day assessment retreat to discuss and decide upon a process for collecting, evaluating, and using assessment data for course improvement. Ultimately, the Course Lead and the Assistant Provost for Planning, Accreditation, and Assessment share the responsibility for implementing the process, with input and support from the Director of the Center for Excellence in Teaching. Sometime after this retreat, faculty members teaching in the course review and discuss the common LOs and assignment(s), as well as the process created in the retreat, during mandatory, multi-day, specialized course design institutes. They then design their courses using the common LOs and incorporate the course-embedded assignments.

At the end of the semester, a random sample of students is selected (about 15-20%), and faculty are requested to provide copies of the common assignment for the students selected from their course. A group—including the Course Lead, Assistant Provost, Director of the Center for Excellence in Teaching, and select faculty—then review the student work against a rubric, discuss, and produce a report.

This report is used by the working group to review the course, and the data (concurrently with other data collected) informs changes in the common LOs, common assignments, future faculty professional development, and/or program structure or processes. The working group also evaluates the assessment process and makes changes for the following year if necessary. Faculty members teaching in the courses then review and discuss the data during one-day retreats each year, and use the data to inform changes to their courses.

Indirect Summative Data

Data on student learning in the PLAN is collected through a number of methods. Formal surveys are administered, including the Higher Education Research Institute Cooperative Institutional



Research Program family of surveys and the National Survey of Student Engagement. A matrix of the indirect survey instruments by Essential Capability appears in Table 2 below. In addition to these externally-development instruments, faculty members teaching in PLAN are surveyed at the end of each semester. The survey is developed or revised each year by the Assistant Provost, Director of the Center for Excellence in Teaching, Course Lead, and/or GenEd Director to ask about timely concerns or questions, particularly in response to recent course changes. Additionally, student course evaluations are collected and additional student perception surveys are administered as needed.

Table 2: Survey Instruments and the Essential Capabilities

Essential Capabilities	Communication	Critical Thinking and Creative Problem Solving	Data Analysis and Interpretation	Ethical Leadership	Integrative Learning	Navigation of Cultural Differences
Survey Year						
1st Year	TFS YFCY	TFS YFCY	TFS YFCY NSSE	TFS YFCY NSSE	TFS YFCY NSSE	TFS YFCY
Sophomore	DLE	DLE	DLE		DLE	DLE
Junior	DLE	DLE	DLE		DLE	DLE
Senior	CSS NSSE	CSS NSSE	CSS NSSE	CSS NSSE	CSS NSSE	CSS NSSE

Survey Key:

- TFS – The Freshman Survey
- YFCY – Your First College Year
- DLE – Diverse Learning Environment
- CSS College Senior Survey
- NSSE – National Survey of Student Engagement

As each survey cycle is complete, the Office of Institutional Research generates reports on those survey items relating to the ECs and the student learning experience for the Gen Ed Advisory Board. Annually, the Assistant Provost coordinates overall analysis, synthesis, and reporting of the survey outcomes with the Director of The Simmons PLAN, the Gen Ed Advisory Board, ACCC, ASAC, and the faculty at large.

Formative Data

Formative data is gathered primarily for immediate, confidential use by the instructors to make in-process improvements to their courses. The Center for Excellence in Teaching has offered instructors a number of voluntary, confidential techniques, including quick in-class student surveys, mid-semester formative course assessment using the Small Group Instructional Diagnosis (SGID) process, and course observations. The CET looks themes and patterns across courses and shares these with various leads in the process, working within those confidentiality guidelines.



The Center for Excellence in Teaching and each Course Lead also collaborate to run Communities of Practice, which meet weekly and provide instructors with opportunities to share effective practices, provide mutual support, and address challenges that arise in their courses. These discussions are also a form of data that eventually informs end-of-semester discussions about the course.

Oversight of Assessment Process

While the Director of General Education is responsible for the broad oversight of the assessment process and use of data for continuous updates and revisions to the PLAN curriculum, multiple stakeholders have responsibility for oversight of different components of the assessment plan. Table 3 outlines the roles and responsibilities of different stakeholders in the assessment and curriculum improvement process.

Table 3: Roles and Responsibilities for PLAN Assessment

Who	What
Director, The Simmons PLAN	Manage The Simmons PLAN
Director, Center for Excellence in Teaching	Support course design, ongoing professional development, and individual faculty instructors; provide best practice counsel on General Education and course-embedded assessment;
Assistant Provost for Planning, Accreditation, and Assessment	Support the systematic assessment and improvement of student learning at Simmons; provide resources and organizational support to responsible faculty.
Course Leads	Work with Asst Provost and CET Director to design and implement a course-embedded assessment plan. Collect data from common student assignments, work with faculty section instructors to analyze data, and produce a report.
General Education Advisory Board	Review aggregated / summarized results, advise, and approve changes.
All Simmons Assessment Committee	Review assessment activities for rigor and process; integrate Gen Ed assessment results into summary results for Simmons
All College Curriculum Committee	Review results against goals and proposals
The Simmons College Faculty	Improve student outcomes; assess student learning; revise courses and programs

Overall, this process is deliberately dynamic and flexible, as the PLAN is a new curriculum and being revised and updated as it is implemented and evaluated. All of the stakeholders listed in Table 3 work together closely, in collaboration with senior leadership, to use assessment data for continuous curricular improvement.

