

# Assessment *in* Practice

## **Applying the RARE Model to General Education Assessment:**

### **Working Collaboratively with Multidisciplinary Groups of Faculty?**

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#### **INTRODUCTION**

In recent years, there is a growing trend of support in higher education assessment for institution-wide collaboration between faculty, staff, and students to improve the student learning experience holistically. Engaging faculty in institution-wide collaborations surrounding student learning is a key component of the assessment process (Kinzie, Jankowski, & Provezis, 2014; Rickards & Stitt-Bergh, 2016; Smith, 2013). Assessing General Education programs presents unique interpersonal tasks, such as forming faculty committees or learning communities, initiating conversations with faculty from a variety of disciplines, and educating faculty who may not understand the purpose and value of General Education as a whole (Suskie, 2009). Higher education assessment professionals who are new to the field may find these collaborative efforts challenging, particularly when engaging with faculty who may not be supportive of assessment, with little guidance in the assessment literature on how to build and strengthen relationships in interdisciplinary group settings.

The RARE Model addressed this need for guidance by introducing a framework of interpersonal strategies for building relationships with faculty and staff members to cultivate a positive and collaborative assessment culture institutionally (Clucas Leaderman & Polychronopoulos, 2019). The case example in this debut article demonstrated how interpersonal strategies can be applied when working with an individual faculty or staff member; however, it did not include how the strategies may be employed in group situations. Because assessment professionals often engage with groups of colleagues in their work (e.g., General Education assessment, program review, Quality Enhancement Plan), we felt it necessary to share an example of how the RARE Model strategies can be used in these situations. We begin by briefly reviewing the components of the RARE Model framework to provide context (see Clucas Leaderman & Polychronopoulos, 2019 for full discussion of the theoretical foundation and strategies within each component). Next, we highlight how an assessment colleague (second author) employed RARE Model strategies at her institution when working with General Education faculty. Throughout the example, we will offer specific ways interpersonal strategies may be applied to group settings, including successes and learning opportunities. Finally, we will discuss considerations and future applications of the RARE Model in varied institutional settings. General Education assessment professionals may benefit from utilizing the strategies outlined in the model for breaking down departmental silos and facilitating participatory discussions about learning outcomes assessment built upon trust and transparency.

*Limiting your work to looking at students of color and white students, for example, can mask the hugely varied experiences within these groups and can further marginalize subgroups of students of color who researchers frequently bury within an aggregate.*

## Overview of RARE Model Framework

For assessment practitioners to meaningfully engage faculty, staff, and students in evaluating institutional effectiveness, an intentional focus on collaboration with these stakeholders is essential. The RARE Model is a strengths-based framework of relationship-oriented strategies for higher education assessment practitioners. Each of the four components emphasizes a specific theme involved in collaborative assessment work. **Relate** focuses on the importance of developing trust and building or strengthening relationships with faculty and staff by taking the time to fully understand concerns from their perspectives and as they experience them. **Acknowledge** emphasizes the collaborative nature of our relationships, establishing our roles as partners, and encouraging faculty and staff to build upon their expertise and existing resources. **Reflect** provides tools to help stakeholders critically examine their assessment choices, which can be particularly helpful in addressing obstacles and reluctance throughout the assessment process. **Empower** encourages practitioners to facilitate a context in which faculty and staff feel confident to take the next step toward action in assessment for learning improvement. By combining person-centered/humanistic, motivational interviewing, and positive psychology approaches, assessment practitioners can apply these tools to develop, strengthen, and sustain relationships with faculty and staff, as well as foster a positive assessment culture at their institutions (Clucas Leaderman & Polychronopoulos, 2019).

## Engaging Groups of Faculty in General Education Assessment

Through General Education programs, students are exposed to a variety of domains for building foundational knowledge, essential skills, and curiosity to continue engaging in lifelong learning. Reitenauer and Carpenter (2018) describe General education as “a place of convergence for students and faculty, outside of academic departments and majors, and represents an opportunity for focusing on learning and student experiences that isn’t found elsewhere in the institution” (p. 227). This convergence of diverse institutional community members and academic disciplines can easily become confusing and unwieldy for faculty, as it involves discussing assessment outside of their discipline and represents numerous disciplines that construct the undergraduate curriculum. Recent studies outlined specific interpersonal roles and change-oriented tasks, which are central to the work of assessment professionals in higher education, such as “Narrator/Translator,” and “Facilitator/Guide,” (Jankowski & Slotnick, 2015; Ariovich et al., 2019). However, General Education assessment professionals may find fulfilling these roles to be especially challenging when working with faculty who are resistant, nervous, or antagonistic toward assessment (Gaston & Gaff, 2009; Wehlburg, 2010). They may also experience challenges fulfilling the “Change Agent” role to advocate for assessment and implement positive educational changes (Ariovich et al., 2019). Depending on their individual strengths and disciplinary backgrounds, the assessment professional may need to explore and deepen interpersonal communication and facilitation strategies throughout their career as part of supporting effective practice (Polychronopoulos & Clucas Leaderman, 2019). It is critical that assessment professionals use these interpersonal skills effectively, especially those who engage in group collaborations like General Education. Doing so helps to ensure that neither one discipline nor one voice dominates the multidisciplinary conversation, while focusing on meaning making, communication, and relationship building.

Recommendations on how to engage faculty in discussions and apply discussion facilitation techniques (e.g., Gaff, 2004; Stitt-Bergh, 2015) are useful for assessment professionals to refer to as guides and can be implemented in a variety of situations. The RARE Model adds to these recommendations by providing a roadmap to navigate and communicate with groups of faculty from various disciplines, in an effort to construct a more collective voice. Emphasizing relationship-building, inclusivity, and lessening the focus on compliance contributes to what Wehlburg (2010) defines as a process for transformative assessment: “appropriate, meaningful, sustainable, flexible, and ongoing, and that uses data for improvement” (p. 91). The following example illustrates how assessment professionals can utilize the RARE Model approach to support cohesive collaboration among groups of faculty engaging specifically with the assessment of General Education.

### Employing the RARE Model strategies in General Education: A case example

The General Education Office at the University of Hawai‘i at Mānoa coordinates General Education activities and operations by providing administrative support to the faculty-governed General Education Committee and its Boards. The

*We do not need to generalize students' stories to larger groups, we just need to listen to what they have to say. Descriptive data can help to tell students' stories, allowing us to understand their experiences and provide scaffolding to support not only the students in our small sample, but others as well.*

Assessment Coordinator is responsible for collaborating with faculty to assess student learning in General Education areas and facilitate improvements based on their findings. The current Assessment Coordinator (second author) joined the General Education Office in February 2019. At the time, there was no schedule or plan in place for assessment processes, which prompted her to convene a committee of faculty members to construct an assessment plan for the General Education program.

The assessment plan employed faculty learning communities to discuss teaching and learning within each General Education area. Faculty learning communities are based on Cox's (1999) conception of a small group (around 10) of cross-disciplinary faculty who participate in an extended program to improve teaching and learning. A Faculty Learning Community (Cox, 1999) was established for each area of the General Education program to foster collaboration and collegiality around discussions of the General Education program. The Assessment Coordinator found models for General Education program assessment from a variety of sources and institution websites, all of which emphasized the importance of involving faculty in the decision-making process. While these models were helpful for the overall structure and process of assessing General Education, few offered details about how to develop trusting and collaborative relationships with faculty members after the initial invitation to participate in an assessment conversation. The Assessment Coordinator came across the RARE Model in Research & Practice in Assessment and referred to it as a helpful resource of strategies for building trust, respect, and support in engaging with groups of faculty colleagues. The following discussion illustrates how the Assessment Coordinator applied these strategies throughout ongoing General Education committee meetings.

**Relate.** In the initial stage of forming a group, participants are seeking to understand group expectations, structure, and getting to know one other (Corey, 2016). Because the Assessment Coordinator was new to the institution at the time, she was faced with the challenges of first entering and then joining the group of faculty as a collaborative member. Building solid relationships with faculty colleagues was a critical first step in the process, and it was important for the Assessment Coordinator to begin by building trust among assessment "allies" who were also heavily involved in the General Education program. The Assessment Coordinator utilized strategies such as actively listening, validating perceptions without judgment, asking questions from a place of curiosity, and embracing their challenges with empathy, which led to trust building and developed a strong foundation for those new relationships (see Clucas Leaderman & Polychronopoulos, 2019 for examples of these strategies through the RARE Model framework). This prompted a shift in the focus of discussions from concerns about governance, workload, and evaluation to issues of student learning, cross-campus collaboration, and the value of General Education in student learning. An added benefit was that participants/faculty colleagues began to emulate the Relate Strategies that were modeled by the Assessment Coordinator during the meetings. Over the course of just a few of these meetings, the Assessment Coordinator observed that faculty began to employ more welcoming language about and empathetic perspectives toward assessment that, in her experience, would typically have been tense and

*We must not forget that intersectionality focuses on identifying structures of power and inequality, and we should be careful that intersectional work does not stop at the examination of experiences based on social identities.*

cheerless. By employing this approach in multiprogram, group settings, participants may carry this tone forward and model similar strategies during assessment discussions in their own programs or department, which could potentially magnify the positive effect on assessment culture across the institution. With intentional focus on first building relationships and trust, through employing “Relate” strategies, she set the stage/foundation for a shared understanding of the vision and goals of assessment within the institution’s undergraduate community.

**Acknowledge.** After establishing a trusting relationship and joining the faculty group, the Assessment Coordinator positioned her role as non-directive and collaborative, bringing forth knowledge about General Education and the process of student learning outcomes assessment overall. Although seemingly simple and straightforward, defining our roles within the group was a necessary step to indicate to committee members that their decisions were indeed faculty-driven. By supporting a collaborative relationship and minimizing the power differential, the Assessment Coordinator was able to guide group discussions toward recognizing achievements and exploring challenges as partners, and away from exposing mistakes or problems to fix (i.e., changing the doing/viewing of the problem). In turn, faculty were regarded as experts in their disciplines and curricula, in addition to representing and liaising with other faculty teaching in the General Education program. Acknowledging faculty expertise in this way advanced the assessment process and contributed to greater ownership and autonomy. She encouraged faculty participants to embrace their existing resources and strengths and build upon them, rather than imposing her own agenda for assessment. The Assessment Coordinator also encouraged participants to share how they understood General Education assessment from their own unique disciplinary lenses. She was careful not to skip over specific challenges and took the time to give those a voice within the group. Then, she highlighted the connections between their perspectives, and offered hers into the mix as an assessment practitioner. This process helped to widen the lens of the group’s perspective out from program assessment to institution-level.

**Reflect.** In assessment work, we are sometimes met with reluctance and skepticism, which may take the form of stalling, such as bringing unrelated issues into discussions, focusing on barriers and challenges, or perhaps avoidance and deflection when change is suggested. The Assessment Coordinator encountered this situation when the committee was discussing how to assess the General Education curriculum. She considered what could be prompting these group dynamics; in this case, the faculty’s main concern was constructing an assessment plan that would not be burdensome or intrusive to their pedagogical practices. “Reflect” strategies rely on the strength of relationships and can take time to develop; enhancing readiness to change is, after all, a future-oriented process (e.g., “planting a seed”). The Assessment Coordinator had established positive and collaborative relationships with faculty members, which provided space for her to incorporate the strategies of “gentle persuasion and unconditional support” (Clucas Leaderman & Polychronopoulos, 2019, p. 35). She approached their reluctance with nonjudgmental reflection, curiosity, and



probing questions, which encouraged faculty members to share their thoughts and feelings as they constructed the assessment plan. Employing “Reflect” strategies such as welcoming open discussion, probing questions to better understand reluctance, and non-directive reflecting of their goals helped the Assessment Coordinator to shift the group conversation away from the burden of compliance to “what information do we need to better understand our students’ learning in the General Education program?”

**Empower.** An increase in faculty-led discussions around teaching and learning and faculty-developed resources has led to a greater understanding and deeper interest in assessment of General Education. The Faculty Learning Communities have served as spaces for faculty to share both what is challenging and what is rewarding about teaching, learning, and assessment. The Assessment Coordinator purposefully employed the interpersonal strategies outlined in the RARE Model framework, which strengthened relationships, supported faculty engagement, and provided a positive and encouraging context for General Education assessment. She worked to reframe the assessment narrative and promoted faculty groups to take greater ownership of the assessment process. Through this work, she has noticed that faculty were showing more interest and asking about assessment findings more often. She also observed that the way her faculty colleagues talked about assessment changed in a positive way. For example, instead of broad or ambiguous statements such as, “my students can’t write,” participants began asking inquiry-based questions like, “what do these findings tell us about our student’s writing, and what areas can be improved?” Faculty participants increasingly shared assessment findings when providing workshops to their colleagues about student performance in General Education courses. By intentionally applying the RARE Model approach, the Assessment Coordinator fostered an empowering context by encouraging faculty to take greater ownership in the assessment process, which allowed meaningful assessment to flourish.

## **Conclusions and Future Directions/Considerations**

The Assessment Coordinator enhanced her facilitative impact in the interdisciplinary group setting by building a foundation of positive relationships, fostering collaboration, enhancing readiness to change, and employing supportive interpersonal strategies. While this example offered an applied view of using the RARE Model in an interdisciplinary group context, it was also through the lens of a specific institutional culture: a public land-grant research university. An increasing number of institutions are implementing cross-campus collaborative efforts to improve student learning through discussions of the assessment of student learning outcomes (Hundley et al., 2019). The RARE Model provides guidance to assessment professionals working in General Education and other multidisciplinary groups about how to productively address doubts and fears and nurture a positive assessment culture across the institution. These processes take time, but even focusing on the first two components, i.e., relating and acknowledging, can enhance the productivity of collaborative and multidisciplinary groups. Interpersonal assessment work and strengthening

group relationships are part of a change process and should consider the overall culture of the institution (Kezar & Eckel, 2002), as well as the specific faculty and staff subcultures to be effective. Empowering faculty to think beyond their individual curricula and holistically view the academic experience from the student perspective, such as with General Education assessment, is essential for breaking down silos that often impede meaningful use of assessment findings. It is in this realm where assessment professionals can intentionally apply RARE Model strategies to bring faculty together, shift the lens from discipline-specific to multidisciplinary learning outcomes, and get to the heart of improving students' learning experiences.

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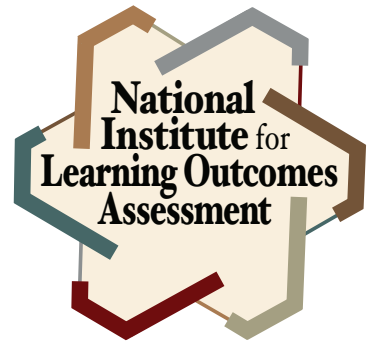
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