

Closing-the-Loop Response to GEAR

SUNY—Fredonia

March 1, 2008

SUNY—Fredonia welcomes GEAR's Closing-the-Loop initiative, taking it as a sincere effort to learn about what has been taking place on our campus and on other campuses throughout SUNY, while offering us the opportunity to reflect on what has and has not worked for us in our mutual effort to enhance student learning within the framework of our general education learning outcomes.

SECTION I. Here is our response, based on the nine learning objectives outlined in the GEAR Guidelines:

1. The objectives for student learning in General Education relate directly to the student learning outcomes defined in the *Implementation Guidelines* of the Provost's Advisory Task Force on General Education.

- SUNY Fredonia lists the learning outcomes in the General Education section of the web page. Each course proposal for general education must be reviewed by the CCC (College Core Curriculum) committee for approval. If the course syllabus does not indicate coverage of the outcomes, the professor is asked to include the missing elements before the final review.

2. Programmatic activities intended to accomplish the campus' objectives for student learning in General Education are described.

- The first "Ideafest" was held to collect ideas as to improvement of communication and instruction within the general education curriculum.
- Each area of the CCC has a structured assessment committee assigned to the development of rubrics for each of the objectives. The committee membership, consisting of faculty members who teach in the various CCC areas, come to consensus as to the level of accomplishment necessary for the various degrees.

3. The measures developed to assess student learning are designed to provide credible evidence of the extent to which students have achieved the learning outcomes or skills stated in the objectives.

- The CCC Committee, Academic Affairs Committee and the Fredonia University Senate all endorsed the plan to use the individual measures for each set of general education objectives.

4. The plan proposes standards to which student performance relative to the learning outcomes in the objectives can be compared.

- For many of the assessments, the faculty use the SUNY measures developed by GEAR. However, the Critical Thinking assessment will be the nationally-normed ACT instrument.

5. The anticipated results of the assessment are able to affirm the degree to which the learning objectives have been achieved and thus make it possible to identify areas that need to be addressed in order to improve learning.

- We have started the process of “closing the loop”. Right now, we do not convene the instructors teaching within each area unless a particular department takes the lead in a certain general education category, i.e. the English Department controls the course delivery in the first category, the Department of Mathematical Sciences faculty meets about the courses in the Mathematics category.
- The campus held its first “Ideafest” for all faculty teaching within the various general education categories. It was an attempt to glean ideas as to provide communication between the faculty members teaching in a particular thread of coursework.
- One of the stumbling blocks is the use of adjuncts to teach the CCC courses and their availability for face-to-face meetings, so e-meetings will be explored through the ANGEL course delivery system.

6. Mechanisms for assessing the campus academic environment are described.

- SUNY Fredonia participates in the NSSE survey as well as the SUNY Student Opinion Survey. General Education is addressed in each of these instruments.
- We are currently hiring a Director of the First Year Experiences on the SUNY Fredonia campus. This individual will coordinate all seminars for first year students, and will actively interface with the general education faculty.

7. The assessment plan has been reviewed and approved through the appropriate curriculum and faculty governance structures.

- All assessment plans are reviewed by the department, deans, the office of the Vice President for Academic Affairs, the CCC Committee (general education committee), the Academic Affairs Committee and the Fredonia Senate. After approval, the President signs off on the plan.

8. The plan adheres to the timetable established by the GEAR Group and agreed to by the University Provost.

- So far, we have been able to accomplish the guidelines set forth in the timetable.

9. The assessment process includes provisions for evaluating the assessment process itself and disseminating assessment results to the appropriate campus community.

- This element is under construction, but with the hiring of the First-Year Experience Coordinator, who will work with the new CCC Coordinator, we have high hopes of improved communication with the university campus faculty.

SECTION II. The formal response does not convey, however, the depth with which the CCC committee has wrestled with this issue of “closing the loop.” The following response—developed and endorsed by the CCC Committee and the University Senate—is an equally important part of our institutional perspective on where we are, how we got there, and, on those bases, where we may plan to go with our general education program, entitled the College Core Curriculum (CCC) program. As such, we hope it will offer both GEAR and us the most meaningful response we can offer.

SUNY General Education Requirements

Fredonia had long been committed to a strong general education program, but the emergence of the SUNY Gen Ed structure undercut a substantial, on-going campus effort to move beyond the then-existing general education program, the General College Program (GCP for short). There had been broad-based and extensive discussions about how we could enhance student learning, including the development of models for scaffolding coursework over several years, building systematically on knowledge and skills previously developed through the curriculum. Although we had not by any means reached closure on our deliberations, there was a strong commitment to working together to produce something that was ours, which fit our sense of what our students needed and what we ought to offer them.

Shifting gears substantially and redirecting our campus efforts with the advent of the new SUNY General Education requirements had several negative effects. We lost the momentum which had been developing for a compelling program of our own. We also seemed to have lost the opportunity for imagination and creativity, since, starting back at square one, we found ourselves struggling to squeeze what we had been doing into the new categories and to adjust our courses to the expectations and requirements of those categories. We had to (and to a certain extent continue to have to) stretch resources to meet staffing requirements in those areas which had previously either not been required or had been required at lower levels further cutting off the possibilities for a better program.

In addition, the sheer bureaucracy associated with course approvals for the new program at both the campus and statewide level consumed a great amount of time and energy. Creativity became the victim of compliance. The extent of the SUNY category requirements tended to preclude a good deal of innovation. There was too much to do to add the required courses beyond what we were already doing and, indeed, in light of the problems of impacted programs, concessions were made to reduce the CCC burden by creating exceptions from what had been the Part III portion of the GCP into what ultimately became the campus CCC Upper Level requirement. We were unable to formally retain a second writing course (usually offered in the major) and we had to abandon what was Part I D (variously fulfilled by a course emphasizing the development of oral communication *or* analytical and critical thinking *or* creative/perceptual skills).

Almost certainly, though, the greatest losses were that we were unable to expand the scope of our programming to more effectively address topics such as diversity and that, in the rush to meet mandates and to at least preserve departmental FTEs, just about any chance for creativity was lost at that time (e.g., we were unable to encourage interdisciplinary courses in no small measure because the course approval challenges were already difficult enough for each of the departments). Due to limited resources, rather than creating new courses that focused on developing skill competencies, or to launch a campus-wide effort to infuse skill development throughout the entire curriculum, we settled for infusing some of these important concepts throughout much of the Gen Ed curriculum (e.g., critical

thinking and information literacy). In these cases, the basic idea was good, but, having focused on claimed coverage of these issues in proposed courses, we haven't had the time to support the development of appropriate course design and appropriate faculty development to help foster these skills within current or slightly revised courses. The same might be said about spoken communication. We went to considerable pains to make sure that majors would have at least two speaking intensive courses as a part of their major programs, but we have yet to mount programs to train faculty in those courses to facilitate the development of speaking and presentation skills.

Not surprisingly, based on the SUNY expectations for approval of courses within its various categories, we were encouraged to look to particular courses to accomplish the specified learning outcomes, rather than thinking more holistically about student learning throughout our curriculum. Although ideally ours would have been an effort to create a spirit of genuine commitment to the SUNY and to our own campus learning outcomes, the course approval process both on campus and through the Provost's Office became a far too bureaucratic exercise. We became captives of the letter of the law rather than its spirit. Energy was concentrated on figuring out what needed to be said and on saying it rather than on mobilizing to assure that our faculty was prepared through better course design and through other efforts to enhance student learning in the various learning outcome areas.

Working with GEAR Expectations and Closing-the-Loop

Fredonia has been attempting to do the various General Education assessments expected by GEAR. However, to date, we have not had a positive experience with SUNY's assessment process and assessment expectations. The SUNY assessment process overseen by GEAR in our experience as been overwhelmingly top-down and in many important respects naïve and unrealistic. Here, it seems to us, "looking good" and "being good" methodologically became far more important than actually being able to effectively gain insight into levels of and reasons for student learning and to gain insight into what might be done to improve student learning.

Early on we did devise our procedures and rubrics and they were approved by GEAR. We then went through the first round of assessments, proceeding with all categories over the three year cycle. Our results were less than satisfactory, involving a good deal of work and few tangible, usable results. Displeasure with and disinterest in the first round made the second round even more difficult to get done. With notable exceptions, it has often been hard to find faculty willing to work on the assessment committees and it has sometimes been difficult to get compliance with all departments and with all faculty involved in teaching in the various categories. It has also been difficult, if not impossible, to achieve the pristine methodological expectations which GEAR aspires to and expects us to attain.

Results of assessments have not been broadly shared in part because of delays in getting the results, but largely because of apparent disinterest, the disinterest coming from results that really don't seem to tell us anything that could result in an action plan for improving student learning. And even if we did get tangible results, there does not seem to be a clear will to do anything about it either from those involved in teaching in a category or institutionally. We've been in a minimal compliance mode for some time now. As a result, the loop hasn't been closing. It remains pretty much open.

That, however, does not mean that we don't care. Indeed, it is quite apparent that we are dissatisfied with what we have been doing and that there is a real, on-going interest and desire to improve our assessment processes and to improve, where possible, student learning.

Indeed, the CCC Committee in recent years has had a substantial focus on assessment and on our assessment problems. It has systematically looked to ways of improving what we might be able to do both in terms of assessment and in terms of overall revisions and reform of our current program.

At this point, assessment is seen as time consuming, imposed by outside forces, intruding on our real work, and all too often yielding little of value for anyone. The procedures we have devised and which have been approved are simply not a part of our flow of instruction and of learning on the level of the courses we are actually teaching, semester by semester.

Part of the problem may be that on our campus “assessment” as a term has connoted the technical process, the gathering of data and preparing a response for an outside agency, rather than something that belongs to us, which facilitates our attaining our goals for student learning, something which is integral to what we care about, something which is integral to what we are trying to achieve. It’s something that “they” want, not something “we” want, i.e something that is alien and “theirs,” not “ours.” It has also, as far as GEAR and GEAR reporting has been concerned, been perceived, rightly or wrongly, as having nothing whatsoever to do actually taking steps to improve student learning.

GEAR has been understood to value a “culture of assessment.” But from our perspective, since assessment is a means, not an end, we believe it would be far better to value a culture of improving and enhancing student learning. Throughout its history, SUNY College at Fredonia often has been and currently is assessment-resistant when assessment is understood narrowly and principally as an end in itself. At times we have even been assessment-antagonistic precisely because assessment as an end in itself has been perceived and experienced as not improving and enhancing student learning. Sadly that makes it far harder for us to do what assessment itself, as a part of a process, is intended to do—to learn more about what we are doing so that we can do it better.

To a large degree, although there are almost certainly too many learning outcomes (29) in too many SUNY General Education categories, few of us would argue with the value of those outcomes (or, indeed, of others that could have been chosen). So our problem is not so much with content as it is with process. It is likely that real groups of committed faculty would be able to take the results of meaningful, diagnostic assessments and collectively work together to improve learning outcomes within their category. However, we have ended up with an assessment process which focuses on levels of success within categories that are only occasionally “owned” by genuine groups of faculty. In our case, the English Department has owned “written communication,” the Modern Language Department has owned “foreign language,” the History Department has largely owned the three History areas (American, Western, and Non-Western/World), and the Mathematical Sciences Department has largely owned the “quantitative reasoning” area. But the remaining areas have largely been orphans. No department or real interest group has owned areas such as the Arts, the Humanities, the Natural Sciences, and the Social Sciences. And, as noted just a moment ago, no real group is invested in oral communication, information literacy or critical thinking.

And we have a mandated assessment process which at best provides feedback to those teaching in an area about results from one semester every three years. What’s more, the results are often based on category-wide criteria and assessment instruments which often don’t really match well the learning outcomes and learning emphases of the individual courses and their instructors. Moreover, despite our developed rubrics, it is not entirely clear that we have any consensus among those teaching in a category on what levels of performance actually do exceed expectations, meet expectations, etc. Those

perceptions at this point may vary significantly between individual instructors, between courses, and between departments.

But category assessment is just that. If well done, and it is currently not being done as well as it might, it could actually give a snapshot of how we are doing category by category.

But our process is not really diagnostic at the critical course level. Because the focus of our assessments has been on the category and not on its constituent courses, we simply aren't looking for ways to see how well individual courses are serving to enhance student learning. And without much meaning at the course level, appropriate changes at that level (realistically the fundamental level at which changes can and will be made, if made at all) become quite unlikely. So, while we need to nurture at the course level, our assessment processes focus on a level above that, a level which is all too often not "real" for faculty and certainly not for our students.

What we have done

Based on discussions within our College Core Curriculum (CCC) Committee over the past two years and based on feedback from our faculty, we are doing some things to move the CCC and (hopefully) student learning forward.

We are reminding faculty, category by category, each semester that they are teaching CCC courses and are reminding them both of the SUNY learning outcomes for their category and of the Fredonia guidelines for that category.

We are better informing our new full-time faculty of the development of the CCC on campus and of the learning outcomes for each category.

We are encouraging dialog concerning the CCC and its future among our faculty. That dialog includes attention to assessment and how we might do assessment more effectively and profitably.

Reflecting the interest and concern for general education on our campus and the desire for significant change both in terms of what we do and how we would be able to close the loop, a substantial number of ideas are currently in play.

Regarding our current program, one of the ideas is that we should try to make our CCC courses more topic-oriented (as opposed to survey courses), more focused and cohesive, more interdisciplinary so that students learn more about connections across disciplines. It has been suggested that we revise our program to make it more effective, exciting, and of contemporary relevance. It has been observed that smaller class sizes, greater emphasis on student engagement, more attention to developing critical thinking and writing skills, and greater use of learning portfolios would be desirable. It has also been said that we could make greater efforts to help our students appreciate the value and importance of their general education experiences, both immediately and for their life-long learning.

Regarding assessment in and of itself, it is hoped that it will be more visible so that all faculty are aware of timelines, of assessment plans, and of assessment results. The use of our ANGEL course management system may help in that regard. There has been a call for us to find ways to actually assess just how much our courses actually do promote student learning by doing more pre-testing and post-testing. Our current category assessment committees only exist for the assessment year (once every three years)

rather than being engaged with and engaging the faculty teaching in the category on a continual basis. Having them active at all times and shifting their prime attention to efforts to working with category faculty to improve student learning within the category might be a promising path to follow. Above all, our faculty wants a process which is meaningful and which does, in fact, help us close the loop.

Where we are and where we need to go

However, the bottom line is that we haven't yet effectively tackled some basic issues which could revitalize our CCC efforts on campus.

Faculty members who inform the CCC Committee state that since the current general education program has been mandated from above, Fredonia is still deprived of a genuine sense of ownership of the CCC as our program, as something the faculty genuinely believe in and care about. They may care about the course they are teaching and about the learning outcomes they (and possibly their department) value for that course, but they are unlikely to value the course and its intended outcomes as a CCC course.

That is also reflected all too often in our advising. Both our faculty and our students have a strong sense that the CCC is something to "get finished" rather than something of real value for our students both in the short run and in the long run. Few, if any, of our students are likely to be able to put our program into the "big picture" of their college careers or, more importantly, of their lives. We simply don't have a student culture that espouses what general education can and should provide and in general, we don't help our students understand how the CCC program fits in (or should fit into) their college careers and the post-college lives and careers. We don't even do much of a job helping students appreciate and take advantage of possible linkages between general education courses and their major.

We should consider an effort to sell our CCC program more effectively to our students prior to the time they arrive on campus and certainly show support and respect for the program during each advising/course selection period, starting with our summer orientation programming. Do those speaking to our students and interacting with our students set the right, the necessary tone for them to embrace our general education efforts? Do they really understand that we consider this program to be important and that they need to do so too?

Except for the genuine and natural groupings that exist around a category (English, mathematics, foreign languages, and the histories), we haven't done what we could have done to get faculty involved in and talking with one another about the other areas of the CCC—the arts, the humanities, the natural sciences, the social sciences, our speaking intensive efforts, the upper level, and our efforts with critical thinking and information literacy. It is doubtful that we share well-articulated visions of what we would like to accomplish in those areas, let alone either a shared commitment to accomplishing those visions and a plan, however rudimentary, that would help us to get to where we might want to go. Deans could certainly help in this effort in their areas and institutionally we could do more for areas which cut across colleges.

Although the CCC Committee has made efforts to stimulate rethinking of our current program, we can and should do more to see what changes can be made that will be good for our students and acceptable to SUNY. This is an important part of keeping the program vibrant and alive (or, maybe better put, getting it to become vibrant and alive).

And, of course, we cannot and should not forget assessment. Or the fact that real improvement “begins at home,” in the CCC courses taught in any semester, not just the ones that happen to be taught that one semester every three years.

We need to do whatever we can (“we” being understood as anyone involved in any way) to make sure that we offer the best learning opportunities possible for our students. That requires the best we can muster in terms of course design and course delivery—a vital, essential, and, alas, currently missing link, especially when a number of our general education courses are taught by adjuncts. Now some adjuncts are extraordinary teachers, but others, like many of the rest of us, could use some help and some mutual support to be better—and all of us can and should be better.

If we can start and sustain a discussion on how we can enhance student learning in each of the areas, if we can share ideas and approaches and techniques, we can go a long way toward making substantial improvements over time. But, obviously, to do so would require that that effort would have the necessary leadership and resources, would really be important, really would matter, and really would count. Regrettably, we are not yet at that point—and we may actually be pretty far from that point whether we are talking about individual faculty members, departments, or higher levels of administration.

In essence, it is unlikely that our students will learn a whole lot more and a whole lot better in any category, unless our actual courses in those categories are better. We need to encourage the development of a wide range of assessment techniques which will give us better insight into what is working and what is not working as well at the course level—and then, of course, use that information to improve courses. While complying with GEAR reporting expectations would be a part of this process, that element would be far less central than it is now and that compliance would naturally flow out of what we would be doing for ourselves and for our students.

Right now, though, our category assessments really don’t yield all that much that would help individual faculty members teaching in those areas to improve their courses (and our category outcomes). We can, of course, revisit how we assess at the category level, the level now expected of us once every six semesters. It is possible that we can learn more through better assessment techniques. But unless we do find a way to get many individual faculty members in a category transforming their approaches to teaching and expanding and enhancing their students learning opportunities, it is doubtful that we’ll be able to generate all that much positive change.