

**Self-Assessment Tools:
GEAR's Criteria for Campus General Education Assessment Plans
and Tips for Closing the Loop**

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The General Education Assessment Review (GEAR) Group, composed of faculty and assessment leaders across the University, played an important role in the State University of New York's assessment initiatives for eight years, as it guided the development, implementation and use of local general education assessment plans on campuses. Although the GEAR Group's last year of work is 2009-10, campuses may find its review criteria and tips for closing the loop (that is, using assessment results to make improvements) to be helpful for self-assessments of general education plans and procedures, as the criteria and tips reflect best practices in assessment and consultation with the regional accreditation body. The criteria and tips shown below reflect slight revisions to GEAR's work to make them serve as self-assessment tools.

GEAR's Criteria for Campus General Education Assessment Plans

1. **The plan makes a direct relationship between the student learning outcomes for its General Education curriculum (or curricula) and the student learning outcomes of the SUNY-GER as defined in the *Guidelines for the Approval of State University General Education Requirement Courses*.** Campuses may also include local student learning outcomes.
2. **The plan indicates that the campus has instructional activities intended to accomplish its student learning outcomes in General Education.** The campus has guidelines or procedures for designating courses as SUNY-GER (or local general education) courses when the courses are aligned with the SUNY-GER or local student learning outcomes.
3. **The plan proposes the use of measures to assess student learning that are designed to provide credible evidence of the extent to which students have achieved the learning outcomes or skills stated in the outcomes.** For each learning outcome, appropriate assessment measures have been established for determining the degree to which students have mastered the outcome. In judging the appropriateness of a specific measure, the following questions are pertinent.
 - Will it *directly measure* student learning (i.e., as differentiated from the *perception* that learning has taken place)?
 - Will it measure the outcome it is intended to measure (i.e., will it have reasonable *face validity*)?
 - Are there assurances that the measure is reliable, particularly with respect to the ability of two independent scorers to rate it similarly (i.e., will it have *inter-observer reliability*)? While this issue is less important for objective measures (e.g., multiple-choice exams), it is critical for qualitative approaches (e.g., portfolios), which do not yield "one correct answer."
 - Will the data collected from the measure be representative? It may not be feasible, nor is it necessary, for campuses to assess all students on a particular measure. Therefore, it is important to assure a representative sampling of students.
4. **The plan sets standards to which student performance relative to the student learning outcomes can be compared.** The campus might set, for each learning outcome, a definition of what student performance the faculty considers as, for example, "exceeding," "meeting," "approaching," and "not meeting" standards.
5. **The anticipated results of the assessment are able to affirm the degree to which the learning outcomes have been achieved and thus make it possible to identify areas that need to be addressed in order to improve learning.** The campus has mechanisms for sharing assessment results with appropriate faculty and staff and, if necessary, for making programmatic improvements based on the assessment results.

6. **The assessment plan has been reviewed and approved through the appropriate curriculum and faculty governance structures.** The campus has a process through which the plan was developed and approved on the campus.
7. **The plan includes a schedule for the periodic assessment of the General Education curriculum.**
8. **The assessment process includes provisions for evaluating the assessment process itself and disseminating assessment results to the appropriate campus community.** The campus has processes for evaluating the assessment process once complete, making changes in the process if necessary, and sharing assessment results with the appropriate campus community.

GEAR's Tips for Closing the Loop

GEAR developed the following FAQs to assist campuses by providing clarifications and examples of good practice from a variety of sources. GEAR encouraged campuses to consider strengthening their CTL activities using the FAQs, since the improvement of teaching and learning remains the best reason for campuses to assess student learning. Since these FAQs were published, the Middle States Commission on Higher Education has been increasing the rigor of its expectations for institutions, which means that evidence about closing the loop activities that are not emphasized in GEAR's FAQs – such as using assessment results to inform institutional planning and budgeting – are now more commonly expected.

1. What does “closing the loop” mean as it relates to the assessment of student learning?

Closing the Loop, or CTL, refers to a wide variety of outcomes and actions that result from an institution's review and consideration of student learning outcomes assessment data. Critical to this process is that these revisions are made on the basis of qualitative and quantitative data that are gathered systematically, not on the basis of anecdotal evidence or intuition. CTL outcomes and actions tend to fall into the following categories:

Making Improvements to Teaching, Courses, or Curricular Programs

Most often, CTL refers to mechanisms through which involved faculty/staff make changes to courses, instruction, or programs based on their review of assessment data. A fuller discussion and examples of this CTL category are provided below in Question 5.

Disseminating Assessment Results to Appropriate Members of the Campus Community

According to Middle States' *Characteristics of Excellence* (2006), an institution should be able to provide evidence that student learning assessment information is shared and discussed with appropriate constituents so that there is a general understanding of student performance which can lead to either maintaining existing practices or recommendations for improvement. A fundamental part of this process is the development of *a priori* expectations for student performance on the assessment, so that it is clear the extent to which students have either met or not met standards.

In addition, institutions that have had particular success in the assessment of student learning have typically had mechanisms in place to assure a broader awareness and knowledge of assessment results, campus-wide discussion of those results, shared decision-making, and celebrating assessment successes. Of course, it is important to ensure that these results are reported and disseminated in such a way that individual faculty cannot be identified. Still, allowing the larger campus community access to assessment data provides important insights into how students are performing generally and can lead to valuable intra-institutional discussions on that performance and how it might be improved.

Evaluating and Revising the Assessment Process

It is also appropriate to use assessment results to evaluate – and revise as appropriate – the assessment process itself. In evaluating the assessment process, modifications may be considered that would improve the relevance and/or the effectiveness of the assessment.

Guiding the Planning and Implementation of Professional Development Activities

It is not unusual for academic departments and programs to realize as a result of the assessment process that faculty and staff responsible for delivering the curriculum could benefit from additional training or development opportunities. In some cases, these opportunities might involve activities related to the assessment of student learning. Or, they may focus on new pedagogical strategies intended to enhance the curriculum.

2. Is the CTL process the sole responsibility of individual departments or programs?

No. In fact, it is most likely that academic departments and programs with effective CTL strategies in place are located in institutions that value, promote, and support the assessment of student learning and the use of assessment data to improve teaching and learning. This is true for a number of reasons, including the fact that CTL requires a department or program to reveal both its strengths and weaknesses, which will only occur in a supportive institutional context. Similarly, good practice CTL activities frequently require the infusion of resources into a program (e.g., to fund filling a gap in the curriculum, faculty development activities, or enhanced support services for students). Colleges and universities that have a strong institutional commitment to assessment are characterized by a non-punitive assessment philosophy and a willingness to allocate funding on the basis of sound assessment data.

3. How would a campus demonstrate the effective use of assessment results to improve its general education program?

Such improvements may manifest themselves in a variety of ways and be targeted toward courses, entire programs, pedagogy, and/or support services. None of these are more important than others, but it is important for a campus to describe the following for a particular assessment: 1) what was found and what the faculty/staff thought it meant; and 2) specific changes, as appropriate, recommended by the faculty/staff that link clearly to the assessment findings. With time and the repeated assessment of specific outcomes, it will become possible to determine if these improvements lead to an improvement in student learning.

In order to reinforce the importance of institutional commitment in the assessment process, as discussed above in question 2, campuses should be able to describe the allocation or reallocation of resources to make changes in its general education program on the basis of previous assessment findings.

Examples of using assessment results to improve programs include:

- Adding an emphasis on research methodology to specific target courses in a program
- Infusing student learning outcomes (e.g., critical thinking, information management) throughout a curricular program
- Supplementing lecture presentations with the opportunity for class discussions
- Providing more options for support services (e.g., peer tutoring) for students
- Adding faculty lines to a foreign language department in order to decrease class size

4. How would a campus demonstrate the effective dissemination, sharing, and discussion of assessment results?

There are a variety of ways in which assessment results may be effectively disseminated. The process will depend largely on each campus' approved governance review structure in this regard.

Campuses should be able to: 1) describe the mechanisms in place to ensure that all appropriate faculty, departments, support staff, and administrators have been informed of assessment results; 2) provide documentation that assessment results have been reviewed, shared, and evaluated by the appropriate campus community; 3) illustrate how this CTL activity resulted in recommendations for modification of the process; and 4) indicate how such modification resulted in more effective use of assessment results and improved student learning (depending on whether or not an assessment of the modified practice has been conducted).

Some examples of effective strategies for disseminating, discussing, and using assessment results include:

- Providing faculty in a specific department aggregate data from student learning outcomes assessments, ensuring that individual faculty members received non-aggregated data only from their own courses
- Facilitating the discussion of assessment results within specific departments and embracing recommendations for change
- Providing counseling, admissions, curriculum, and advisement areas with aggregate data from the outcomes assessments
- Communicating changes that have resulted from CTL activities to all appropriate campus constituents
- Posting aggregate data on the institution's Website from student assessments and inviting members of the campus community to comment on the results
- Integrating planning decisions where assessment results have been systematically used to inform institutional planning and the allocation of resources

5. How would a campus demonstrate celebration of assessment successes?

Middle States' assessment materials emphasize that a campus' assessment successes should be positively reinforced so that the campus community realizes that the institution values and rewards these successes. Some examples of effective strategies for celebrating assessment successes include:

- Holding an "Assessment Day" on campus, featuring presentations by departments or programs on assessments and results
- Disseminating successful accomplishments in the improvement of student learning through the campus Website, faculty and staff newsletters, and student publications
- Sharing effective assessment successes with colleagues at other institutions
- Receiving continued institutional support and resources for ongoing assessment activities
- Recognizing programs that have been especially effectiveness in assessing student learning as "best practice" programs
- Establishing institutional budgeting priorities based on effective assessment practices

6. How would a campus demonstrate the effective evaluation of and revision to its existing general education assessment plan?

In order to have its existing general education assessment plan approved by GEAR, a campus had to include a discussion of how it would bring about this very process. While there may be any number of ways to accomplish it, this process should be characterized by the following steps: 1) review of the assessment process by faculty and staff members involved in the assessment; 2) the opportunity for the campus community, as appropriate, to provide feedback; 3) development of a new assessment plan, taking this feedback into account, by individuals/groups with the responsibility for doing so based on the campus' existing curriculum/governance processes; and, 4) review and approval by the campus' governance body.

Examples of revisions to a campus' general education assessment plan include the following:

- Revising a measure because students either significantly over-performed or under-performed based on faculty members' *a priori* expectations
- Using multiple measures, both qualitative and quantitative, because obtained results from one measure seem counter-intuitive or overly simplistic
- Moving the assessment of an infused competency (e.g., critical thinking) until later in students' academic progression because of the realization that students require more exposure to and practice for this competency

- Revising rubrics because it becomes clear that existing rubrics did not adequately differentiate student performance

7. How would a campus demonstrate effective implementation of professional development activities based on assessment results?

In some cases, ideas for professional development activities related to assessment will stem from a perceived problem or weakness in the assessment process. In other cases, these activities result from weak student performance on learning assessments. Further, professional development activities may be more formal, taking place off campus as part of a conference or workshop, or may be relatively informal, organized by campus faculty themselves. As is the case with other CTL activities, what is key is that faculty and staff members review assessment results and decide among themselves what actions may help lead to improvement in future assessments.

Examples of this CTL activity are as follows:

- Faculty members participate in a workshop on how to develop, administer and score writing rubrics for writing because an existing rubric failed to differentiate adequately between levels of student performance
- Faculty members attend a conference on active learning strategies because students are not performing adequately in response to lectures
- Faculty in a particular department hold norming sessions because of difficulty obtaining good inter-observer reliability on qualitative assessments