

# Scaling Up General Education Assessment

A large, white, stylized letter 'M' is centered on the page, set against a light purple background that features a silhouette of a mountain range.

University of Montana

NWCCU Demonstration Project

May 12, 2015

Innovative general education initiatives are a central feature of mission fulfillment at the University of Montana. As outlined in our mission statement, “The University of Montana-Missoula pursues academic excellence as demonstrated by the quality of curriculum and instruction, student performance, and faculty professional accomplishments.” By addressing the core issues in our Strategic Plan, including “Partnering for Student Success,” “Education for the Global Century,” creating a “Dynamic Learning Environment,” and implementing our “Planning-Assessment Continuum,” we are fulfilling our mission (see <http://www.umt.edu/planningassessmentcontinuum/docs/2020stratplan.pdf>). Data are being collected in these areas, and each is connected to General Education. Our efforts to “scale up” the mountain of General Education Assessment are described in the five sections below.

## **I. A Foundation of Learning Outcomes**

The University of Montana’s General Education Preamble (see [http://archive.umt.edu/catalog/14\\_15/academics/general-education-requirements.php](http://archive.umt.edu/catalog/14_15/academics/general-education-requirements.php)) describes our intentions to “develop competent and humane individuals who are informed, ethical, literate, and engaged citizens of local and global communities.” UM’s General Education assessment initiatives are grounded in the learning outcomes developed for each of our 11 “Groups” or domains of General Education: English Writing Skills; Mathematics; Modern and Classical Languages or Symbolic Systems; Expressive Arts; Literary and Artistic Studies; Historical and Cultural Studies; Social Sciences; Ethics and Human Values; American and European Perspectives; Indigenous and Global Perspectives; and Natural Sciences. Each General Education area has specific and measurable outcomes. These 11 Groups are delineated on UM’s new General Education website, which is more intuitive and user-friendly for students, advisors, and faculty: <http://www.umt.edu/general-education/>

## **II. A Committee Infrastructure for General Education Assessment**

We feel strongly that General Education efforts need to be institutionalized through formal committee and reporting requirements. UM’s support for General Education assessment is spearheaded by four committees on campus:

*1. The University Assessment & Accreditation Committee* has developed and refined our overall assessment plan for general education.

2. *The Assessment Advisory Committee* reviews all departmental and program assessment reports, many of which contain assessments of general education learning outcomes such as written communication.

3. *The General Education Committee* reviews General Education course proposals and updates General Education policies. General Education course proposals now have to describe how the learning outcomes will be assessed.

4. *The Writing Committee* examines proposals for approved writing courses, and provides guidance on our University-Wide, Program Level Writing Assessment (explained below).

### **III. Institutional Assessment Methods and Tools**

UM has employed a multifaceted approach for evaluating General Education through formative and summative assessments, as well as direct and indirect methods. We have highlighted nine of these initiatives below:

1. *Embedded assessments in General Education courses*: A pilot project in the Natural Sciences was conducted in Spring 2015. Faculty in this area developed reports containing these five areas: 1) Course description; 2) Course learning goals, and how they are connected to the General Education learning goals; 3) Method(s) of assessment; 4) Findings; and 5) Action steps. The reports from the Chemistry, Physics, Botany, and the Use and Abuse of Drugs courses all showed increases in student learning in areas such as critical thinking, interpreting results, writing, and content knowledge.

2. *Information literacy assessment in the library*: Information literacy learning outcomes have been mapped for 100, 200, 300, and 400 level courses (see <http://www.lib.umt.edu/library-information-literacy-curriculum>)

3. *University-wide Program-level Writing Assessment*: We are in our second year of this committee-level approach to assessment (see [http://www.umt.edu/facultysenate/committees/writing\\_committee/UPWA.php](http://www.umt.edu/facultysenate/committees/writing_committee/UPWA.php)). In April 2015, 48 faculty and staff participated in a Writing Retreat and assessed 166 papers. Faculty feedback on this revised process has been very positive.

4. *Using Clickers for formative assessments and VALUE Rubrics for direct assessments*: Faculty at UM are using clickers to measure students' learning in General Education classes, and the Office of the Provost recently acquired clickers to be used in courses and workshops across

campus. Additionally, faculty members are encouraged to adapt and implement AAC&U's VALUE rubrics to assess student learning.

5. *Assessment of the Global Leadership Initiative (GLI)*: Rubrics, surveys, and a focus group have been used to assess the learning outcomes for the GLI.

6. *Assessment of Student Affairs Experiences*: Co-curricular assessment has a long history at UM, and is spearheaded by the Student Affairs Assessment Council (see <http://www.umt.edu/vpsa/programs/student-affairs-assessment-council.php>). Learning outcomes are currently being developed and revised at the departmental and divisional levels.

7. *Collegiate Learning Assessment (CLA) (Fall 2015-Spring 2016)*: UM has participated in several cycles of the CLA, a standardized assessment of students' writing and critical thinking skills, and will do so again this coming year.

8. *Project Innovation Cultivation (Fall 2015-Spring 2016)*: This coming year, we will also be involved in this nationally benchmarked study examining how higher education develops students' innovation capacities. More specifically, it will assess how students' curricular and co-curricular experiences cultivate students' ability to "generate and execute contextually beneficial new ideas."

9. *Student self-reports and reflection about General Education learning outcomes*: Through graduating senior surveys and focus groups, we are planning to collect student perception data to determine whether they think UM's General Education program helped them achieve the intended outcomes.

#### **IV. Professional Development and Training**

In addition to the training that occurs on committees and other assessment initiatives, we have also provided campus level trainings and professional development at national conferences. Our on-campus trainings have included a regional workshop on learning outcomes assessment that we hosted in September 2014. General assessment workshops have also been held for department chairs, faculty, and staff. Training on how to conduct a focus group was the focus of another training in December.

We attended several national conferences this semester to learn best practices about General Education assessment. A team of faculty and administrators attended the AAC&U Annual Conference, where the innovativeness and value of our Global Leadership Initiative was

confirmed. We also were represented at the AAC&U General Education Assessment Conference, where we gave a presentation entitled, “A Longitudinal and Multifaceted Evaluation of Students’ Information Literacy and Communication Skills.”

As a complement to the information gained from national meetings, we are also learning from publications available about General Education assessment and curriculum reform. These include *General Education Maps and Markers: Designing Meaningful Pathways to Student Achievement* and *The VALUE Breakthrough: Getting the Assessment of Student Learning in College Right*. Our plan for General Education is also informed by several seminal textbooks on academic assessment, such as *Assessing Student Learning* and *Assessment Clear and Simple*.

## **V. Exploring Curriculum Reform**

As the culmination of our journey spanning many assessment initiatives, the “summit” of our General Education efforts involves our discussions about innovative curriculum reform. During the last 15 years, UM has initiated a number of General Education Taskforces to enhance our curriculum. More recently, in April 2015, the College of Humanities and Sciences hosted an event entitled, “Why and How: The State of General Education.” The discussion focused on general education programming at the university level, and featured a panel of faculty from classics, philosophy, mathematics, and the Davidson Honors College. On October 26-27<sup>th</sup>, we are planning to host a regional conference entitled, “Defining a 21<sup>st</sup> Century Education for a Vibrant Democracy” that will allow us to explore aspects of General Education and liberal education in detail.

Our discussions about General Education reform focus squarely on the learning outcomes we want students to have for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. We would like to promote more team teaching and interdisciplinary approaches. We recognize the benefits of encouraging more applied learning related to “big questions” and real-world problems. Several of these innovations are already captured in our distinctive Global Leadership Initiative (see <http://www.umt.edu/gli/>), which we want to expand to allow many more students to participate.

## **Conclusion**

As illustrated in this report, we affirm that General Education assessment is strongest when based on meaningful learning outcomes, supported by well-functioning committee work,

balanced by a wide variety of methods, and informed by best practices in the field. This combination of theory and implementation is informing our discussions about how to create the most dynamic education General Education curriculum we can envision that fulfills our institutional mission. We look forward to refining these practices through our NWCCU Demonstration project in the coming years.

## **References**

Association of American Colleges and Universities. (2015). *General Education Maps and Markers: Designing Meaningful Pathways to Student Achievement*.

Sullivan, D.F. (2015). *The VALUE Breakthrough: Getting the Assessment of Student Learning in College Right*. Association of American Colleges and Universities.

Suskie, L. (2009). *Assessing Student Learning*. San Francisco, CA. Jossey-Bass.

Walvoord, B. E. (2004). *Assessment Clear and Simple*. San Francisco, CA. Jossey-Bass.

# Scaling Up General Education Assessment at the University of Montana

## Curricular Reform

- Promoting more integration & interdisciplinary approaches
- Encouraging more applied learning related to “big questions” & real-world problems
- Building upon the Global Leadership Initiative
- Focusing on and refining the learning outcomes

## Professional Development & Training

- Campus Level Training
  - Assessment Workshops and Focus Groups
- National Level Participation
  - AAC&U Annual Conference
    - \* Support for the value of the Global Leadership Initiative
  - AAC&U General Education Assessment Conference
    - \* Gave a presentation about information literacy and Gen Ed curriculum reform

## Institutional Level Assessment Activities

- Embedded assessments in General Education courses (e.g., Natural Sciences)
- Information literacy assessment in the library
- University-wide Program-level Writing Assessment
- Using Clickers for formative assessments and VALUE Rubrics for direct assessments
- Assessment of the Global Leadership Initiative
- Assessment of Student Affairs experiences
- Collegiate Learning Assessment (CLA) (Fall 2015-Spring2016)
- Participation in nationwide Project Innovation Cultivation (Fall 2015-Spring2016)
- Student self-reports & reflection about General Education learning outcomes

## Committee Level Assessment Activities

- The University Assessment & Accreditation Committee—  
Overseeing the assessment plan for general education
- Assessment Advisory Committee—  
Reviewing all departmental & program biennial assessment reports
- General Education Committee & Task Forces
- Writing Committee

## General Education Learning Outcomes

- Mathematics
- Social Sciences
- Expressive Arts
- Natural Sciences
- English Writing Skills
- Ethics & Human Values
- Literary & Artistic Studies
- Historical & Cultural Studies
- Indigenous & Global Perspectives
- American & European Perspectives
- Modern & Classical Languages or Symbolic Systems