I. General Education Assessment Overview

The mission of Mason’s General Education Program is to offer a broad set of skills, ways of knowing, and areas of information content that are important contributors to academic success in a major field of study, to adaptability over a career of lifelong learning, and to the practice of citizenship. The program consists of four foundation requirements that develop essential skills, six core requirements that encourage diverse learning across a range of intellectual domains, and a synthesis requirement that demonstrates the application of liberal learning at an advanced level. The vision for the program is articulated in Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Happiness: A Rationale for General Education at George Mason University (http://www.gmu.edu/depts/provost/gened/index.html).

Over the past few years, the Office of Institutional Assessment (OIA), in collaboration with the University General Education Committee, has conducted workshops in which faculty members across disciplines worked together to define learning outcomes for a general education area of study (i.e., category). After formal approval by the General Education Committee, these were published in the University Catalog and on OIA’s and the Provost’s websites. The guideline for implementing these learning outcomes requires faculty who teach general education courses to address a majority of the learning outcomes for the category in which their courses reside, in addition to their course specific outcomes.

The General Education Assessment Guideline, published in the summer of 2008, was created after two years of research and preparation. It targets six categories: arts, literature, western civilization/world history, global understanding, social and behavioral sciences, and synthesis. These categories are assessed through course portfolios, adapted from a successful model implemented at the College of William and Mary. A course portfolio is prepared by an individual faculty member and is composed of the following components: course/section syllabus, faculty reflection (focusing on how the faculty member addresses and assesses the general education learning outcomes), selected course assignments/projects and samples of student work (from a set of randomly selected students). In addition to portfolios, a learning outcomes survey is conducted in the same semester among all students who are enrolled in a general education course in the category under review.

Faculty review teams, each composed of one faculty member in the field and one outside of the field, rate these portfolios using a common set of criteria. The assessment results are shared with the participating faculty, their chairs, and the General Education Committee to advocate for best practices in teaching and to identify areas for improvement. For more detailed information about course portfolio assessment, please visit https://assessment.gmu.edu/Genedassessment/index.html.

II. Assessment Activities, Fall 2008 – Fall 2009

In the 2008-2009 academic year, three general education categories were reviewed using course portfolios: arts, literature and western civilization/world history. The following section outlines how the assessment was carried out.
The remaining categories, social and behavioral sciences, global understanding and synthesis, will be addressed in a future issue of In Focus.

**Learning Outcomes:** In September 2008, the Provost Office invited associate deans, department chairs, directors and key faculty members from art and literature fields and the General Education Committee members to a one-day workshop to discuss faculty expectations for student learning, effective learning experiences and assessment methods in general education art or literature courses. At the end of the day, they had a working draft of learning outcomes for each category. After the workshop, a few faculty members continued working in smaller groups or via email and eventually identified five learning outcomes for each category. For western civilization/world history, a group of faculty members from the History Department also proposed five learning outcomes through a similar process.

Each set of the learning outcomes was presented to the University General Education Committee by a spokesperson from the working group. The Committee further refined the learning outcomes and approved them in mid-October. The learning outcomes were immediately sent to the chairs of the departments offering those courses. Department chairs were asked to circulate the learning outcomes and alert faculty to an upcoming assessment. Before the spring semester started, the Associate Provost for Undergraduate Education directly contacted all faculty members who would teach a course in these categories about the new learning outcomes.

**Course Selection:** Course selection was conducted in November, 2008. A total number of 38 courses/sections were randomly selected for assessment: arts – 16 courses/sections out of 43 courses, literature – 14 courses/sections out of 11 courses, and western civilization – 8 courses/sections out of 2 courses. Information sessions for the selected faculty members were held in December 2008 and January 2009. A few faculty members opted out of the assessment due to personal/family circumstances. Due to last-minute staffing changes, a few faculty members did not know about either the general education learning outcomes or the assessment until a few days before the semester started. Individual/group trainings were offered until March 2009.

**Student Surveys:** As part of the assessment, a learning outcomes survey was conducted among all students who were enrolled in a general education arts/literature/western civilization course. The instructors whose courses had been randomly selected were actively involved in the development of the survey instruments and the final versions of the surveys were approved by most of them. The surveys were conducted two weeks before the final exam week and the faculty members were asked to encourage their students to complete the survey. The surveys had a response rate of 21%, resulting in a decision not to incorporate the results in the formal assessment findings.

**Portfolio Review:** By the end of May, 32 portfolios were collected: 12 from arts, 12 from literature and 8 from western civilization/world history. The reviewer pool included tenured faculty members in related fields and members of the University General Education Committee. Sixteen reviewers were divided into eight teams (one was the expert from the field and the other from the General Education Committee) and each reviewed four portfolios in summer 2009. The review criteria were developed and piloted by a small working group of faculty members and assessment professionals. All reviewers went through a training in which they had in-depth discussions about the criteria using two portfolios as examples. Then the reviewers worked with their partners to further calibrate their ratings. Some reviewers completed all the reviews in teams and others worked partially with their partner. For two portfolios, the reviewers came to a different judgment about whether the course adequately addressed the general education learning outcomes and a third reader was added to the review team.

**Results Overview:** The reviewers found all courses addressed at least three out of the five general education learning outcomes for the related category and most of the selected faculty members addressed these learning outcomes very well. Almost all the courses were found to be appropriate for the general education curriculum, having appropriate course structures, procedures and assignments. One weakness for most courses across all categories is the articulation of the general education learning outcomes to students. A couple of courses received a less than satisfactory rating from one of its reviewers. These courses were reviewed by a third reviewer and one received a “fair” rating and the other received a “good” rating. Detailed review results for each category are presented in the following sections.

**Results Dissemination:** Two debriefings were conducted in fall 2009, one with all the reviewers and the other with the participating faculty members, in which aggregated results were presented and feedback was collected from the participants. After the faculty debriefing, individual results were sent to the faculty members confidentially. Then, the Associate Provost for Undergraduate Education, the Associate Provost for Institutional Effectiveness and the Director of Institutional Assessment met with department chairs to discuss the assessment results, issues of particular concern, and possible ways to use the assessment results. To address the concerns of some participating faculty, for departments
with more than one participating faculty member, the department chairs received aggregate results instead of individual results. The ratings were not used by faculty, chairs, deans, or the provost’s office, as elements in merit pay or reappointment, promotion, and tenure dossiers. The aggregated results were also presented to the University General Education Committee, which was followed by in-depth discussions about the implications and action plans to ensure the overall effectiveness of the general education program.

III. Assessment Results: Arts

In spring 2009, a total of 43 general education arts courses were offered by 73 faculty members from the following departments/schools: Art History, Art and Visual Technology, Dance, English, Music, and Theater. A total number of 2,573 individual students were enrolled, among whom 404 took more than one general education arts course. Fifteen courses/sections were selected for portfolio assessment and 12 portfolios were submitted along with 55 student work samples. The participating faculty members taught 24% of the enrolled students. The portfolios were reviewed by 6 faculty members: three from the arts fields and three from the General Education Committee. In addition, over 500 students responded to the learning outcomes survey for a response rate of 21%.

General Education Learning Outcomes for Arts

A general education arts course should address at least three of the following learning outcomes. Upon completing the course, students will be able to:

1. Identify and analyze the formal elements of a particular art form using vocabulary appropriate to that form
2. Demonstrate understanding of the relationship between artistic technique and the expression of a work’s underlying concept
3. Analyze cultural productions using standards appropriate to the form and cultural context
4. Analyze and interpret material or performance culture in its social, historical, and/or personal contexts
5. Engage in the artistic process, including conception, creation and ongoing critical analysis

Course Emphases

The reviewers were asked to first identify the general education arts learning outcomes addressed in the course by examining the syllabus, faculty reflection, and course assignments. As Table 1 shows, Outcomes 1 and 2 were addressed by almost all the selected courses, Outcome 5 was covered by almost 80% of the courses, Outcomes 3 and 4 by two thirds of the courses.

The reviewers also rated how well the identified learning outcomes were addressed in the course. As Figure 1 shows, for Outcomes 1, 2, 4 and 5, the majority of the ratings were “exemplary.” Outcome 3 was rated relatively lower than the other outcomes, but still half of the ratings were “exemplary.” One reviewer did not think one course addressed Outcome 4 very well and another reviewer did not find sufficient information about how Outcome 5 was addressed in another course.

Figure 1. How well are the intended learning outcomes addressed in the course?
In the learning outcomes survey, students were asked to rate the course’s contribution to their knowledge and skills in the same five learning outcomes. Their responses were overwhelmingly positive (see Figure 2) with half of the respondents citing “very much” and a quarter citing “quite a bit.”

Figure 2. Student Perception*: To what extent has this course contributed to your knowledge and skills in the following areas? (“Not applicable” means the outcome was not addressed in the course.)

Student Work Samples
The Office of Institutional Assessment did a random sampling of 4-6 students from each course/section. Faculty members were asked to identify an assignment and then submit one work sample from each randomly selected student and, if they preferred, an additional sample from a self-selected student. A total of 55 student work samples were submitted, most of which came from randomly selected students. The work samples came in a variety of forms -- concert reports, reflection papers, short research papers, class projects, creative art works, etc. The reviewers found that the assignments, from which the work samples came, were most likely to assess Outcomes 1, 2, 4 and 5. Not many assignments were intended to assess Outcome 3. All the assignments gave students “very much” (67%) or “quite a bit” (33%) of an opportunity to demonstrate their competence in the intended outcomes (Figure 3). Over 60% of the work samples fully manifested the intended outcomes and another 36% demonstrated it “partially” (Figure 4).

Overall Ratings
Of five general questions, a majority of the courses were rated either “exemplary” or “good.” On the “appropriateness of course material for the general education curriculum,” exemplary ratings accounted for 79% and good ratings accounted for the remaining 21%. “Articulation of the general education learning outcomes for students” was rated relatively lower than the other four items.
IV. Assessment Results: Literature

In spring 2009, a total of 11 general education literature courses were offered by 39 faculty members from three departments: English, Philosophy, and Modern and Classic Languages. A total number of 1,402 students were enrolled, among whom 1,060 took English 201. Fifteen courses/sections were selected for assessment and 12 portfolios were submitted along with 49 student work samples. The participating faculty members taught over 400 enrolled students. The portfolios were reviewed by 8 faculty members: three from the literature fields and five from the Gen Ed Committee. In addition, 295 students responded to the learning outcomes survey for a response rate of 21%.

Learning Outcomes
A general education literature course should address at least three of the following learning outcomes. Upon completing the course, students will be able to:

1. Read for comprehension, detail and nuance
2. Identify the specific literary qualities of language as employed in the texts they read
3. Analyze the ways specific literary devices contribute to the meaning of a text
4. Identify and evaluate the contribution of the social, political, historical and cultural contexts in which a literary text is produced
5. Evaluate a critical argument in others’ writing as well as one’s own
**Course Emphases**

Reviewers found that almost all courses addressed all the general education learning outcomes for literature (see Table 2). Outcome 1 was addressed the best (see Figure 8), with “exemplary” accounting for 33% and “good” accounting for 54% of the total ratings. For the other outcomes, “exemplary” ratings range between 21-25% and “good” ratings between 46-58%. For Outcomes 4 and 5, the percentages of “fair” ratings are relatively large.

Figure 9 presents students’ perceptions of the courses’ contribution to their knowledge and skills in the five learning outcomes. The survey respondents also found that their courses addressed almost all the five learning outcomes. Between 39-45% of the respondents thought their courses contributed “very much” to their learning and another one quarter to one third rated the contribution as “quite a bit.”

**Student Work Samples**

Most of the 49 student works were papers; a few were short-essay exams and presentations with written summaries. Reviewers found that the assignments, from which the work samples came, were intended to assess multiple learning outcomes, Outcomes 1 and 3 in particular. Three quarters of the assignments gave students “very much” or “quite a bit” of an opportunity to demonstrate their competence in the intended outcomes (Figure 10). Over one third of the work samples “fully” manifested the intended outcomes and another 57% demonstrated the outcomes “partially” (Figure 11).

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**Table 2. Which gen ed learning outcomes does the faculty member intend to address in the course/section?**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Literature Outcomes</th>
<th>Identified</th>
<th></th>
<th>Not Identified</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Count</td>
<td>%</td>
<td>Count</td>
<td>%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Outcome 1</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Outcome 2</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>96%</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Outcome 3</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>96%</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Outcome 4</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>96%</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Outcome 5</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>92%</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>8%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* The count is based on the number of ratings, which is double the number of course portfolios.

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* Note: the survey included all students enrolled in a general education literature course, many of whom were taught by faculty members who did NOT participate in the portfolio assessment. As noted above, the low response rate to this survey means that these results are presented on an informational/advisory basis only, not as a formal assessment finding.
Figure 10. To what extent does the assignment give students the opportunity to demonstrate their competence in the intended outcome(s)?

Figure 11. How fully do the student work samples manifest the intended outcomes?

Overall Ratings
On five general questions about the courses, “exemplary” ratings range between 17-25% and “good” ratings account for at least 50%. “Articulation of the general education learning outcomes for students” was rated the lowest of the five, with 25% of the ratings falling into the “poor” category.

Reviewers found most courses addressed the general education learning outcomes very well (Figure 13): exemplary ratings accounted for 17%, good ratings 58% and fair ratings 17%. Two courses received a “poor” rating from one of the reviewers. These courses were reviewed again by another two reviewers. Eventually, one course received a “fair” rating and the other received a “good” rating. The third reviewers found that insufficient explanation about the connections between their courses and the general education learning outcomes through faculty reflection contributed to the unsatisfactory ratings from the initial reviews. Figure 14 presents the results from the learning outcomes survey. Half of the student respondents thought the courses had increased their interest in literature either “very much” (21%) or “quite a bit” (30%); one third selected “very little” and the remaining 16% selected “not at all.” Discussions with faculty and administrators indicated that the main reason for the heavy weighting toward “good” rather than “exemplary” alignment in a category that might be expected to embody principles of general education is related to intentionality and articulation of the general education outcomes rather than any deficiencies in content or disciplinary pedagogy. This is one possible area of improvement that will be examined in the next cycle of assessment.

Figure 12. Given the mission of the General Education program, please rate the course in the following categories:

Reviewers found most courses addressed the general education learning outcomes very well (Figure 13): exemplary ratings accounted for 17%, good ratings 58% and fair ratings 17%. Two courses received a “poor” rating from one of the reviewers. These courses were reviewed again by another two reviewers. Eventually, one course received a “fair” rating and the other received a “good” rating. The third reviewers found that insufficient explanation about the connections between their courses and the general education learning outcomes through faculty reflection contributed to the unsatisfactory ratings from the initial reviews. Figure 14 presents the results from the learning outcomes survey. Half of the student respondents thought the courses had increased their interest in literature either “very much” (21%) or “quite a bit” (30%); one third selected “very little” and the remaining 16% selected “not at all.” Discussions with faculty and administrators indicated that the main reason for the heavy weighting toward “good” rather than “exemplary” alignment in a category that might be expected to embody principles of general education is related to intentionality and articulation of the general education outcomes rather than any deficiencies in content or disciplinary pedagogy. This is one possible area of improvement that will be examined in the next cycle of assessment.

Figure 13. Overall, how well does the course address the intended gen ed learning outcomes for the category?

Figure 14. Student Perception: To what extent has this course increased your interest in literature?
V. Assessment Results: Western Civilization/World History

The Western Civilization/World History category has two courses, History 100 and History 125. In spring 2009, HIST 100 offered 25 sections by 12 faculty members and HIST 125 offered two sections by two faculty members. A total number of 1,277 students were enrolled, 1,130 in HIST 100 and 147 in HIST 125. Six sections of HIST 100 and two sections of HIST 125 were selected for portfolio assessment. All 8 portfolios were submitted along with 35 student work samples. The participating faculty members taught 839 students. The portfolios were reviewed by 4 faculty members: two from the History department and two from the General Education Committee. In addition, 289 students responded to the learning outcomes survey for a response rate of 23%.

Learning Outcomes
A general education western civilization/world history course should address at least three of the following learning outcomes. Upon completing the course, students will be able to:

1. demonstrate familiarity with the major chronology of Western Civilization or World history
2. narrate and explain long-term changes and continuities in Western Civilization or World history
3. identify, evaluate and appropriately cite online and print resources
4. develop multiple historical literacies by analyzing primary sources of various kinds (texts, images, music) and using these sources as evidence to support interpretation of historical events
5. communicate effectively—orally, in writing, and/or using digital media—their understanding of patterns, processes, and themes in the history of western civilization or the world

Course Emphases
Reviewers found that almost all courses addressed four learning outcomes for western civilization/world history, Outcomes 1, 2, 4 and 5 (see Table 3). Outcome 3 was addressed in a majority of the courses. Reviewers found that the majority of the courses were “exemplary” in addressing Outcomes 1, 3, 4 and 5 (see Figure 15). The ratings on Outcome 2 were relatively lower: a little over one third were “exemplary” and half were “good.”

Figure 15. How well are the intended learning outcomes addressed in the course?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Learning Outcomes</th>
<th>Identified</th>
<th>Not Identified</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Count*</td>
<td>%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Outcome 1</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Outcome 2</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>94%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Outcome 3</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>88%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Outcome 4</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>94%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Outcome 5</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* The count is based on the number of ratings, which is double the number of course portfolios.

Figure 16 presents students’ ratings of the course contribution to their knowledge and skills in the five learning outcomes. For Outcomes 1, 2, 4, and 5, between 43-48% of the respondents selected “very much” and 28-31% selected “quite a bit.” Outcome 3 was rated relatively lower with one third of the respondents selecting “very much” and 27% selecting “quite a bit.”
Figure 16. **Student Perception:** To what extent has this course contributed to your knowledge and skills in the following areas? (“Not applicable” means the outcome was not addressed in the course.)

![_bar_chart](chart1.png)

*Note: The above results are based on ALL survey respondents. Many of them were enrolled in courses taught by faculty members who did NOT participate in the portfolio assessment. As noted above, the low response rate to this survey means that these results are presented on an informational/advisory basis only, not as a formal assessment finding.*

**Student Work Samples**

Faculty members submitted 35 student papers, mostly from randomly selected students. Reviewers found that the assignments, from which the work samples came, were most likely to address Outcomes 3 and 5. Eight-seven percent of the assignments gave students “very much” of an opportunity to demonstrate their competence in the intended outcomes (Figure 17). Over half of the work samples “fully” manifested the intended outcomes and another 38% did so “partially” (Figure 18).

![Pie chart](chart2.png)

**Overall Ratings**

About 69% of the ratings fell into the exemplary category for two items (see Figure 19): appropriateness of course material for the general education curriculum and course structure and procedures contributing to the likely achievement of the general education outcomes by students. “Articulation of the general education learning outcomes for students” was rated the lowest of the five, with 13% of the ratings falling into the “poor” category. Reviewers found that most courses addressed the general education learning outcomes very well (Figure 20): exemplary ratings accounted for 44%, good ratings 50% and fair ratings 6%. Students’ ratings divided almost evenly into four categories (Figure 21), from “very much” to “very little.”

![Pie chart](chart3.png)
Figure 19. Given the mission of the General Education program, please rate the course in the following categories:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Exemplary</th>
<th>Good</th>
<th>Fair</th>
<th>Poor</th>
<th>Not Enough Info</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Articulation of the gen ed learning outcomes for students</td>
<td>31%</td>
<td>44%</td>
<td>13%</td>
<td>13%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Congruence of the gen ed learning outcomes with the course content and goals</td>
<td>47%</td>
<td>40%</td>
<td>13%</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appropriateness of course material for the gen ed curriculum</td>
<td>69%</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>6%</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Course structures and procedures that contribute to the likely achievement of the gen ed outcomes by students</td>
<td>69%</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>6%</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appropriateness of the assignments or forms of assessment, in relation to the gen ed learning outcomes</td>
<td>56%</td>
<td>38%</td>
<td>6%</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 20. Overall, how well does the course address the intended gen ed learning outcomes for the category?

Figure 21. Student Perception: To what extent has this course increased your interest in western civilization?

VI. Evaluation of the Assessment Process

Historically, while learning outcomes were often implied in the six areas of general education included in the portfolio process, the assessment process described here brought about the first clear articulation of general education learning outcomes for the arts, literature, and western civilization/world history categories. Because of the active involvement of key faculty members across disciplines, the identified learning outcomes fit very well with a majority of the approved courses for these categories. Faculty involvement and departmental support are critical factors in carrying out the assessment and using assessment results for improvement. For example, the associate chair of Art and Visual Technology Department (AVT) sent an email to the selected faculty, acknowledging the efforts they put into the assessment and re-assuring them that the assessment was not a review of individual faculty members: “This is a review of us, AVT. The review is a self-evaluation. We are looking at our program from within, in the most objective way we can.” A senior history professor met with every randomly selected faculty member who taught HIST 100, making sure the purposes and the requirements of the assessment were well understood. Department chairs from Dance and Modern and Classic Languages not only participated in the faculty information session, but also met with their faculty in person to go over the review results.

This was the first time that course portfolios were used to assess Mason’s general education program. Out of 38 randomly selected faculty members, 32 submitted a portfolio, for a compliance rate of 84%. The participating faculty members had different appointment types: tenured, tenure track, term, adjunct, teaching assistant, and post-doc. Most of them found the requirements for course portfolios to be manageable, with few problems providing their course materials and samples of student work. Faculty reflection took relatively more effort for some faculty than others: the time they spent on it ranged from 2 to 6 hours. Reviewers spent an average of one and a half hours per portfolio.
The following section summarizes the feedback collected from the participating faculty and reviewers. Some of the issues or concerns have been or will be addressed in the next round of assessment and others have to do with the limitations of the course portfolio assessment.

1. To address some concerns about possible misuses of the assessment results, the Provost’s Office disseminated a memorandum which stated:
   
   The ratings are NOT used, by faculty, chairs, deans, or the provost’s office, as elements in merit pay or reappointment, promotion, and tenure dossiers… They relate specifically to the alignment of a course (and, in the aggregate, a set of courses) with the corresponding general education outcomes.

2. Both reviewers and participating faculty members correctly pointed out that the required elements for portfolios were not sufficient for an all-around review of the course. Other important elements of the course, such as lecture notes, textbooks and readings, and faculty feedback to students, were not examined in the review. Some participating faculty members criticized the review as relying too much on articulation through one’s syllabus and reflection, rather than the actual delivery of the course. Reviewers, on the other hand, believed that they could make a judgment of a course’s alignment with the relevant general education outcomes by examining the materials provided in a portfolio. Reviewers stressed that a faculty’s reflection, although very helpful in understanding the course, was not sufficient without supporting evidence from the syllabus and course assignments.

3. The review criteria were developed after the faculty members submitted the portfolios. Some faculty members said they might have prepared their portfolios differently if they knew the review criteria ahead of time. In future assessment, review criteria will be introduced at faculty information sessions. Some reviewers also suggested changes to rating categories, feeling that the “exemplary” category might not be appropriate.

4. Some aspects of student competence, such as engagement in the creative process, are difficult to demonstrate through a portfolio format. So far, we are not able to assist faculty members in taping a student presentation or performance. Generally, student papers and essay exams are the most popular work samples but they may not be the best way to document student competence in certain areas.

5. Some participating faculty members felt that some reviewers did not have sufficient understanding of the field or the course. It was true that some reviewers found it difficult to judge the quality of a creative artwork without consulting their partner from the arts field. In the future, we will ask reviewers to work even more closely in teams. In some cases, reviewers’ apparent lack of understanding of the course was caused by an insufficient explanation by the faculty member who created the portfolio. For example, a faculty member claimed that four general education outcomes were addressed in the course but a reviewer was only able to identify two outcomes from the materials provided.

6. Faculty information sessions, conducted by the Associate Provost of Undergraduate Education, the Associate Provost for Institutional Effectiveness and the Director of Institutional Assessment, were effective in getting faculty prepared for the assessment and getting their concerns resolved. Most faculty members who attended the orientations ended up making changes to their courses to better align with the general education outcomes. Due to last-minute scheduling and staffing changes, some of the participating faculty did not know they were going to teach a general education course and that the course was going to be assessed until a few days before the semester started, and thus, missed the opportunity to make self-corrections. For example, the English 201 faculty did not have an orientation until four weeks into the semester. In the future, OIA will closely monitor staffing changes and reach out to departments and faculty as early as possible.

7. Equally as important as the missed information sessions was the timing in getting the new learning outcomes to all instructors. The process had been necessarily hurried due to reporting time frames, but faculty and chairs in each academic unit with general education responsibilities now receive a reminder at the beginning of every academic year to include the approved outcomes in each general education course syllabus, and to take these outcomes into consideration when making assignments.
VII. Use of Results and Future Plans

The general education assessment involved faculty across disciplines in a process of identifying common learning outcomes for each general education category, demonstrating the alignment of individual courses with the common learning outcomes, reflecting on teaching and student learning, reviewing course structure and processes, assessing student learning outcomes, and using the assessment results to improve the curriculum. Identifying common learning outcomes was a critical first step. Many faculty members, particularly adjunct faculty members, said that these learning outcomes provided them with useful guidance for course revision and development. Some faculty, after participating in the assessment orientation, modified their syllabi and assignments for the spring semester. Some of them embedded the general education learning outcomes with their course learning outcomes and others revised assignments to better assess general education outcomes. For example, Edward Gero, who taught THR 210, integrated the General Education Arts Outcomes 1 and 2 in his grading criteria for one of the course projects. In his instructions, he told students that they would be graded on, among other things, their abilities to “identify and analyze the elements of a theatrical production” and “understand the relationship between the artistic technique of choosing production elements and the expression and effectiveness of the underlying purpose of their choice in supporting and revealing the information in the script.” Other faculty members, who did not have enough time to make changes in the spring semester, planned to do so in the fall. For example, Mark Bergman made significant changes to his assignments in MUSI 103 for the fall of 2009: instead of using multiple-choice exams, he now requires six one-page papers that focus on the application of class materials. Some of Mark Bergman’s new assignments can be accessed on OIA’s website at: https://assessment.gmu.edu/Genedassessment/portfolios.cfm.

In the assessment, we found that a few faculty members were not aware that they were teaching a general education course and students were not aware that they were taking a general education course. The assessment results clearly showed that “articulation of the general education outcomes for students” was a weakness across categories. Reviewers found that many courses, although addressing the general education learning outcomes, did so implicitly. Based on these findings, the General Education Committee decided to take the following actions: 1) The Committee will urge faculty members to embed the general education learning outcomes in their course context and articulate these outcomes to students; 2) the Committee will use the learning outcomes as guidelines in course proposal review: new course proposals must articulate how the proposed course addresses and assesses the general education learning outcomes; 3) the Committee will do a syllabi review, identifying the courses that are not in alignment with the general education learning outcomes. The Committee will urge departments to examine their general education course offerings, fixing the courses that have deviated from the common learning outcomes.

The assessment results presented in the previous sections were based on randomly selected courses/sections offered in spring 2009. Although all the participating courses were found to have appropriate course materials for the general education curriculum, which validates the essential approach to general education being practiced in the assessed categories, it should not be concluded that all approved general education arts/literature/western civilization courses/sections are appropriately aligned with the student outcomes articulated for the general education curriculum. The first round of assessment did not directly address faculty development either. In the future, we will collaborate with the Center for Teaching Excellence to support faculty in developing general education courses and aligning their courses with the learning outcomes. We will continue working with departments in using assessment results to improve their courses. In fall 2009, two more general education categories were assessed: global understanding and social and behavioral sciences. In spring 2010, all synthesis courses were assessed and the portfolios were reviewed in the summer.

1 Prior to 2009, the following general education categories were assessed regularly in response to a mandate by the State Council of Higher Education for Virginia (SCHEV), written communication, oral communication, quantitative reasoning, scientific reasoning, information technology and critical thinking. The assessments are conducted on a cyclical basis in selected general education courses. For more details, please visit: https://assessment.gmu.edu/StudentLearningCompetencies/index.html.