Update on Higher Learning Commission Accreditation and Assessment of Student Learning

In July 2013, the Assessment Director and the General Education Coordinator attended a Higher Learning Commission (HLC) workshop titles “Current Expectations for Assessment of Student Learning, General Education, and Students Success.” The HLC has reaffirmed the increasing rigor with which it expects institutions to focus on student learning outcomes. At the conference, the HLC outlined a deepened commitment to student learning with expectations surrounding the demonstration of high quality academic programs, institutional practices, and support for student persistence and completion. The clear message was that institutions must place student learning at the center of all they do. This focus on increased rigor and responsibility was presented at Deans’ Council in September and was presented at the Chairpersons’ Meeting in November. At the Deans’ Council meeting, the Provost recommended that a committee be convened to begin initial evaluation of institutional readiness. As part of that initial evaluation, Assessment, General Education, and the Provost’s Office began to discuss and examine a potential make-up of a steering committee for HLC accreditation.

**General Education**: Progress continues on the two initiatives begun in 2011 to assess the general education program: the ROAD project initiative and the domain assessment initiative.

Progress continues with the ROAD project for assessment of writing in several ways. Most notably, the ROAD rubric was modified so that the ROAD project would align with the Voluntary System of Accountability (VSA), a faculty scoring day for ROAD samples was conducted, and the current results of the ROAD project were presented to faculty and presented at the annual Higher Learning Commission Conference in Chicago. Beginning this year, the VSA allowed the use of artifacts evaluated with American Association of Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) rubrics as a possible assessment method. In the past, YSU has used a separate assessment to fulfill its VSA requirements.

Since the ROAD rubric was largely based upon the AAC&U rubrics, General Education and Assessment saw an opportunity to consolidate tow assessment into one. In order to accomplish the use of ROAD project for VSA assessment, several things needed to be done: first, the ROAD rubric needed to be adjusted so that it covered all the critical thinking items included in the AAC&U rubric; and second, the language of the original writing section of the rubric needed to be modified slightly. A committee of representatives from each college met and adjusted the ROAD rubric’s language accordingly. The updated rubric and the merger of the VSA and ROAD projects were submitted to and passed by YSU’s Academic Senate.

Working with Assessment and the YSU Writing Center, General Education conducted a faculty scoring day for samples from the ROAD project. A group of approximately 20 faculty memebers scored essays from English 1551 and other upper-division courses. The purposes of this exercise were: to improve faculty members’ awareness of writing across campus, to start a dialogue about the assessment of writing across campus, and to improve the ROAD project. The results of the scoring day were largely positive, with many faculty members expressing surprise at the level of rigor required by the English 1551 essays.

A group from YSU (Tod Porter, Joseph Palardy, Hillary Fuhrman, and Angela Messenger) presented the ROAD project and its finding at the selective HLC conference in Chicago in April 2014. The title of the presentation was “The ROAD: Assessing Writing and Critical Thinking with VALUE Rubrics.” An accompanying paper was published in the conference proceedings and can be found at <http://cop.hlcommission.org/Assessment/porter.html>.

As a follow-up to the ROAD project, Assessment and General Education will ask departments in fall 2014 to create curricular maps of writing within their majors. This exercise will promote discussion of writing and writing assessment at YSU. Curricular mapping for critical thinking, oral communications, and quantitative literacy will follow in subsequent semesters.

General Education is also investigating the use of AAC&U’s Quantitative Literacy Rubric to evaluate artifacts of student work similar to the use of the ROAD project to assess writing and critical thinking.

The second initiative involves assessment of the general education knowledge domains. In fall 2012, Dr. Milton Cox, a nationally-recognized expert on learning communities, consulted on campus and ran a workshop to help initiate the development of learning communities for general education assessment. His feedback prompted some modifications to the previous YSU timeline. In particular, Dr. Cox highly recommended only one-year learning community commitments from faculty as opposed to the multi-year commitments that were imagined in the originally proposed timeline. A pilot learning community on the improvement and assessment of general education began in January 2013 and finished in May 2013. Despite difficulties in recruitment for the learning community, all of the participants felt that the learning community was a worthwhile experience. A learning community on improving writing on campus is currently being conducted, but it is facilitated through Faculty Development instead of General Education. This system appears to be a more natural fit for leaning communities at YSU. In spring 2014, the General Education Committee began to investigate the possibility of using a course portfolio system to assess and improve general education outcomes as an alternative to the learning community approach.

In addition, to the development of learning communities, steps have been taken to include faculty and student perceptions and self-evaluations in the assessment process. Surveys of both faculty and students are being developed. A preliminary version was submitted to a small group of volunteers from various college-level assessment committees. The survey is currently being revised based on their feedback. A number of short, 5-minute surveys will be conducted instead of one long survey. The faculty survey should be distributed in fall 2014, and the student survey should be distributed in spring 2015. Departments may be asked to complete curricular mapping for the general education skills learning outcomes during academic year 2014-2015.

**Writing Curriculum Maps**: Assessment and General Education are partnering to use existing assessment reporting structures to gather curriculum data on writing outcomes in conjunction with program assessment reports. Undergraduate academic programs were trained in October in college-specific workshops and are in the process of submitting Writing Curriculum Maps, a conceptual curricular mapping tool that outlines the expectations for the development of writing skills for required courses in academic majors. This intersection between general education writing and academic program learning outcomes is an area of focus in the HLC Criteria for Accreditation. The aim is to better articulate variations in writing development that are inherent and appropriate to various disciplines, to foster discussions among faculty about curricular expectations around writing communication, and to promote dialogue at the campus level about how to use best practices to improve writing development and achievement. Results from these maps will be used in support of general education assessment plan and in a spring writing symposium.

Program Assessment Participation: The Office of Assessment has begun the assessment reporting and review cycles for 2014-15. Co-curricular assessment reports have shown a high level of engagement and quality in their reporting: 95% of units have reported, and while reviews are still being finalized, currently 90% exhibit assessment processes of high quality (evaluated as “exemplary” or “proficient”). Eleven volunteer staff and faculty members performed team reviews of the 20 co-curricular reports in summer 2014.

Due to development of the writing curriculum maps, academic programs were asked to submit a brief report that focused on the essential areas of student learning data analysis