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MEMORANDUM

TO: James C. Moeser, Vice President for Academic Affairs and Provost

FROM: Assessment Advisory Committee
Karen W. Carey, Chair *Karen W. Carey*

RE: Plan for Assessing General Education

The Assessment Advisory Committee has met bi-weekly since September, and I am pleased to submit on their behalf this plan for assessing general education at USC.

You will note that the plan is in two major sections. One is the outline of general education goals and objectives and the criteria for assessing our success in helping students reach them. We believe that assessment should be a faculty-owned activity, and hope that this section will be circulated separately to deans, department chairs and faculty, both here and on and the regional campuses, for comment, affirmation, or whatever the appropriate action may be.

The second section includes: 1. context, process and introduction, 2. recommendations for assessment methods, 3. a timetable and plan for their implementation 4. suggestions for decisions and actions that should be made at the college and department level and 5. suggested faculty development activities and campus-wide resources needed to support this kind of assessment.

We believe that implementation of this plan will make general education more coherent for both students and faculty, and provide information we can use to improve both teaching and learning.

This report is labelled "draft" because of the short turn-around time the committee had to review and respond to this version of the document. We will continue meeting to further develop the strategies recommended for assessment. The committee has worked diligently so far, and is probably the logical group to evaluate assessment data collected campus-wide and make interpretations for the faculty about the results. If the members need to be re-appointed please let us know. We may have names of some additional members for the continuing committee.

Proposed Plan for Assessment of General Education at USC

Spring 1994

Introduction

The committee was appointed by the Provost and charged to develop a plan and policy for assessing general education and the major. We met bi-weekly for six months; at the beginning there was substantial debate about trying to assess general education University-wide when the core curriculum is constituted at the college level, about what assessment is and who it is for, and about what general education is. We agreed that assessment is primarily for improvement, but also for accountability, and that we would think about our task in terms of serving both purposes. The committee sees general education as cumulative, i.e., although it is addressed formally in the core curriculum, at least some of those skills and attitudes developed through the core curriculum are further developed in all undergraduate majors.

Eventually we agreed to begin with the recommendations of a previous committee on teaching and the core curriculum. (A copy of their summary of recommendations is attached.) We formed three task groups to address related groups of goals and develop objectives to support them. We attempted to translate those objectives into student outcomes and state them in terms that will help us and students assess their progress toward these objectives. The objectives describe the capabilities we hope to see in all our graduates, no matter what their major. These are detailed in the section labelled "assessment criteria."

While the goals and objectives are loosely grouped by disciplinary domains, the criteria indicate that this group of faculty saw general education as the development of certain abilities (which combine knowledge and skills), attitudes and behaviors which extend across the knowledge base. The skills include observation, analysis, interpretation, application and synthesis of information and ideas, which are sometimes grouped together under the rubric of critical thinking. They also include skills in communication, problem solving, and awareness of individual and social responsibility, and informed citizenship, all of which will be important to our graduates no matter how the curriculum or the world of work may change.

Recommended strategies and assessment methods

The committee generated a long list of assessments strategies; while they varied in details, they generally fell into assessments that can be accomplished and used at several levels.

Course-level: All core curriculum courses in some way support the core curriculum/general education goals of the university. As the faculty who participated in the FIPSE project on assessing general education across the system have demonstrated, course-embedded assessment can be a very powerful tool for improving teaching and learning. Using this kind of assessment requires faculty to specify the general education goals they plan to address, then develop teaching strategies to help students progress toward those objectives. Course-embedded assessment can also include the classroom research model, which allows faculty to treat their teaching and student learning in their classroom as a subject for research.

Program-level: Because the core curriculum can vary from college to college and from one major to another, some assessment of general education can be done within departments. In those departments which have capstone courses, for instance, faculty have an excellent vehicle for assessing a variety of communication skills, as well as student attitudes and behaviors. The committee was interested in the possibility of Senior Year Experience courses which could provide an opportunity for assessment of general education toward the end of the college experience for students whose majors do not include capstone courses.

Transcript analysis and course-cluster analysis can be used at the program, college or campus-wide level to determine which course-taking patterns lead to the largest gains in progress toward educational objectives in general education and in the major. Departments can use such information to advise students, to improve the curriculum and to open the discussion of teaching and undergraduate education in order to learn what happens in those classes producing large effects that others could emulate.

We assumed that all students should be proficient in oral communication and that not all of them could take a speech course. One solution would be to provide special training for faculty and graduate students who might teach courses designated as "s" for emphasizing public speaking. Both faculty and students would need to be familiar with the criteria used to assess oral communication. In this case it would be up to the program faculty and the college deans to make these course designations, and then to ensure that students did have experiences which helped improve their oral communication skills. In a capstone course or Senior Year Experience course, it might be possible to compare the oral communication skills of those who took Theater and Speech 140 and those who did not.

College level: Much assessment of general education would naturally occur in the colleges, as the core curriculum is defined and operationalized there. One way to approach this would be to use the attached matrix as a starting point to see where in the curriculum the objectives are addressed. Such a process invariably leads to extensive discussion and is an important way to get faculty involved in developing their own approaches to assessment.

University-wide: For assessing general education at this level, the Committee had a variety of suggestions. Our first step was to use existing data and procedures in new ways, then to incorporate other measures. (See the attached page from the "Preliminary Plan".)

Written communication can be assessed using portfolios of students' work across courses, samples of written work of seniors across colleges, especially designed written assignments within courses, and senior theses or major papers. Writing assignments can be constructed to examine, in addition, critical thinking, problem-solving, attitudes or knowledge. The Committee also favored the use of locally developed comprehensive senior exams to help assess writing and other aspects of general education.

They suggested using interviews by faculty of groups of students to assess students' skills in listening, making connections between disciplines, and the application of general education to new situations. Oral examinations and/or presentations in capstone or senior-level courses could be videotaped and analyzed by the committee. Also suggested are performance simulations which require students to apply their general education to new scenarios, either in written form or in a conversation as part taped group project. The University-wide assessment committee would help evaluate and interpret these kinds of assessment data.

Assessing the attitudes and behaviors we hope to see in our graduates can also be done in several ways. One of these is the questionnaire or survey. Currently Student Affairs administers the College Student Experiences Questionnaire (CSEQ) to a cross-section of students every other year. The CSEQ provides information on students' levels of involvement in various aspects of campus and academic life, self-reports on certain behaviors, and estimates of how much they have gained in broad areas of general education. It also provides national norms for similar types of institutions. The format allows for the inclusion of 20 items for the individual institution, which Student Affairs has used to assess the effectiveness of some of its goals and programs.

In alternating years, the senior survey, developed locally, is administered to a sample of seniors. Its focus varies from one administration to the other, but it is designed to examine some of the student development objectives of the Student Affairs area, many of which are also general education objectives.

Each year (since 1966) our entering freshmen complete the CIRP (Cooperative Institutional Research Project) questionnaire; there is now a follow-up version for seniors which would allow us to assess changes in attitudes and behaviors of the same students over a period of 4 or 5 years, and to analyze them by college or major. Although there would be some expense involved, administering the follow-up CIRP to seniors every 2 or 3 years would provide valuable information. Every other year we also survey our alumni three years after graduation and ask them to evaluate their general education courses and instruction, along with other measures of institutional effectiveness. Portfolios, interviews, classroom assessment, and writing in capstone courses or senior letters can answer some of the questions raised by survey responses and provide added depth to our understanding of the undergraduate experience at USC.

Timetable

The committee suggests that we begin by assessing one aspect of general education across the University next year. When asked to rank the general education goals in order of importance, written communication was the unanimous first choice of the entire committee, so that should be an early first target. The committee will address the timetable more specifically after there is agreement about the outlined goals and objectives and the appropriate methodologies for each. Other dates should be scheduled to coincide with our schedule for reporting to CHE.

Resources

To support the assessment effort campus-wide, we should provide and coordinate resources for faculty development in the area of teaching, learning and assessment. A series of workshops on various methods and on assessing general education skills, -- topics such as writing, speaking, using classroom assessment, course-embedded assessment and portfolios - - would help facilitate faculty at all levels in developing assessments for general education and reaping the benefits of their plans. In our view, assessment is inextricably linked with teaching and learning; taking assessment seriously means involvement in pedagogical issues in new ways, and is an important form of faculty development. There are some excellent resources on campus, including several members of the committee, who could serve as consultants in this area and help departments and colleges frame their questions and develop appropriate ways to address them.

A model that has been used with some success at other large universities is the center for teacher, learning and assessment. The major advantages are that it frames assessment as an academic activity and thus is far more engaging to faculty than it might be when seen as a strictly administrative/accountability activity. The other is that it helps focus attention on undergraduate education when more focus in that direction is desired. It would be a logical way to continue the work of the FIPSE project on assessing general education across the system, as well.

While much assessment can be done as part of normal academic processes, some expenses will be incurred every year for survey instruments, data analysis, and postage. The continuing assignment of a graduate assistant to the assessment office will be important to carrying out the university-wide activities. In the event that members of the assessment committee were needed to spend a week looking at assessment results and analyzing them, the committee recommends providing summer stipends for those activities and possibly for abbreviated FIPSE-type summer workshops.

Next Steps

We hope the first section of this report, the draft "Outline for Assessing General Education at USC" will be circulated to deans, department chairs and faculty for comment, modified if necessary, and affirmed or approved as appropriate. The committee's next steps will be to develop more fully the plan and time-table for assessing general education and to proceed with plans for writing assessment across the University.