

Action Project

Title: Revision of General Education Learning Outcomes and Assessment

Version: 1

Institution: Northern Michigan University

Status: Completed

Submitted: 2012-12-07

Category: 1-Helping Students Learn

Timeline

Planned project kickoff date: 2012-12-01

Target completion date: 2014-06-30

Actual completion date: 2014-06-30

Project Detail

Project Goal

Describe this Action Project's goal in 100 words or fewer

The intent of this project is to review and reframe the general education learning outcomes, adopt or develop assessment methods and create a new process and procedure for conducting the assessment of those learning outcomes and using the results. This Action Project does not include review or revision of existing general education divisions.

Reasons For Project

Describe briefly your institution's reasons for taking on this Action Project now -- why the project and its goals are high among your current priorities

From 2005-2011, the Liberal Studies Committee, a standing committee of the Senate, oversaw general education assessment using a basic assessment methodology that was developed and applied, with some variations, on a cyclic basis. By design, only composite results of the assessment participation statistics (indications whether objectives were exceeded/met, nearing, or were not met) and reviewer recommendations were reported. The results were shared with the Academic Senate and the departments teaching in the assessed division. Given the voluntary nature of assessment participation, low response rates, questioned validity and the use of composite results, follow-through of recommendations was low. In April 2012, after completing one full-cycle of assessment the Liberal Studies Committee recommended that significant reform be undertaken for both the oversight of the general education program and assessment of its learning outcomes.

In Summer 2012, a multiphase approach to general education reform began with a review of its organization oversight and the administrative structure, to be followed by a revision of the general education learning outcomes and their assessment. A team attended the HLC Assessment Workshop in October 2012 and confirmed our general education learning outcomes should also be revised -- we have too many and they are not all measurable. The Academic Senate has approved the Phase I task force recommendations on oversight reform and NMU is ready to begin Phase II on learning outcome and assessment revision. It is appropriate to tackle this issue now; one full-cycle of general education assessment proved our current method was less than effective than desired.

Organizational Areas Affected

List the organizational areas -- institutional departments, programs, divisions, or units -- most affected by or involved in this Action Project

Faculty teaching general education courses, Academic departments and colleges, Academic Senate, in particular the General Education Council (new oversight unit replacing the Liberal Studies Committee) and the assessment area within Academic Affairs.

Key Organizational Process(es)

Name and describe briefly the key organizational process(es) that you expect this Action Project to change or improve

General Education assessment of student learning:

- Responsibility and accountability for assessment planning of general education learning outcomes
- Collection of data that students are achieving these general learning outcomes
- Analysis and evidenced use of assessment results to improve the curriculum and course instruction

Project Time Frame Rationale

Explain the rationale for the length of time planned for this Action Project (from kickoff to target completion)

This Phase II General Education Learning Outcomes and Assessment Action Project continues the work of the Phase I task force on general education oversight reform. It will commence while Phase I recommendations are being implemented on a staggered parallel timeline. Rather than develop outcomes and assessment plans from scratch, Phase II will rely heavily on successful national and peer institution models to reduce the amount of project time. Team attendance at general education and assessment institutes and workshops will steadily move the Action Project forward.

The activities included in this project are:

1. Identify barriers towards effective assessment of general education learning outcomes
2. Study current general education literature and theory, and review models from AAC&U and other schools for applicability to NMU
3. Review existing NMU general education expected skills, abilities and objectives in light of LEAP best practices and NMU values.
4. Develop well-formulated general education learning outcomes for NMU that are sustainable and measurable
5. Select and customize assessment measures, targets, rubrics for each outcome using existing tools, e.g. VALUE rubrics and software
6. Prepare an assessment process and procedure including scope (how many outcomes are assessed at once), granularity (how many courses are assessed), flexibility in assessment methods, consistency of measures, participation samples, data collection and expected evidence of use of data
7. Establish assessment criteria for continued general education status
8. Adoption of above outcomes, measures and procedures by the Academic Senate and administration

Project Success Monitoring

Describe how you plan to monitor how successfully your efforts on this Action Project are progressing

- Discussions will be held with the Academic Department Heads and Academic Senate
- An article will be submitted to both the employee newsletter and the student newspaper
- An open forum, either physically or virtually, will be held to collect input
- The task force will be representative of students, assessment specialists, administration, and faculty and department heads from both departments who primarily teach general education and those who do not. The task force will be held accountable for periodic update reports or presentations.
- An intranet site will serve as a repository of task force documents.
- The NMU AQIP website <http://www.nmu.edu/aqip/node/53> will serve as public distribution of documents.

Project Outcome Measures

Describe the overall "outcome" measures or indicators that will tell you whether this Action Project has been a success or failure in achieving its goals

- Establishment of focused general education learning outcomes that are measurable
- Establishment of rubrics and procedures to collect assessment data regarding achievement of general education learning outcomes.
- Increased acceptance of faculty and departments in the assessment of general education outcomes

Annual Update

Project Accomplishments and Status

Describe the past year's accomplishments and the current status of this Action Project

This Action Project is Phase II of a broader General Education Reform and this report should be read within that context. From 2005-2011, the Liberal Studies Committee, a standing committee of the Senate, oversaw general education assessment using a basic assessment methodology that was developed and applied, with some variations, on a cyclic basis. By design, only composite results of the assessment participation statistics and reviewer recommendations were reported to indicate whether objectives were exceeded/met, nearing, or were not met. The results were shared with the Academic Senate and the departments teaching in the assessed division. Given the voluntary nature of assessment participation, low response rates, questioned validity and the use of composite results, follow-through of recommendations was low. Several earlier comprehensive efforts to overhaul the General Education Program were unsuccessful.

Therefore, in Summer 2012, Phase I of a multiphase approach to general education reform began with a review of its organization oversight and the administrative structure. A team, led by the Provost, attended the HLC Assessment Workshop in October 2012 and confirmed our general education learning outcomes should also be revised – we have too many and they are not all measurable. This information and the report from an external assessment consultant in February 2012 gave leverage to the administrative oversight reform. The Phase I task force recommendation to the Senate were: to rename Liberal Studies to General Education (thus better align the program with its label and begin to disconnect history from future change); to increase the autonomy of the faculty oversight committee (thus reducing the number of full Senate approvals that caused gridlock); and to add academic administrative oversight into the process (thus gaining a broader perspective of assessment and more consequences). These recommendations were approved by the Senate in December 2012 and NMU declared this Action Project, Phase II General Education learning outcome and assessment revision. Phase II ends with the adoption of new learning outcomes, development of assessment methods and creation

of a new process and procedure to conduct the assessment of those learning outcomes and use the results. This Phase II Action Project does not include review or revision of existing general education divisions or courses, which encompass Phase III.

Accomplishments thus far for Phase II are summarized below.

Administrative

- New position of Associate Dean of General Education and Retention was filled in January 2013.
- New General Education Council was elected in February 2013 and operational in March; seven faculty serve with three ex officio members: Associate Dean of Gen Ed and Retention, Director of Institutional Accreditation and Assessment and the Registrar.

Learning Outcomes and Assessment Plan

- Created a detailed task plan and timetable to complete Phase II and move towards Phase III.
- Participated in Michigan higher ed institutions' survey on the use of LEAP in current or planned general education programs and participated in follow-up discussions by directors of general education at the responding universities.
- Gathered information on general education assessment theory, case studies, practical approaches and other resources through review and conference attendance.
 - Associate Dean attended AAC&U General Education and Assessment Conference in February 2013
 - Assistant Provost, Associate Dean and Director of Institutional Accreditation and Assessment attended HLC conference in April 2013.
- Investigated the AAC&U LEAP materials, reviewed LEAP-based programs at other institutions and discussed applicability to NMU.
- Faculty surveyed to identify the most desired learning outcomes for general education.
- Analyzed NMU faculty preferences for general education learning outcomes in comparison to other Michigan institutions and in the context of LEAP recommendations.
- Collected student input through a brief student survey and a common chalkboard – a student governance-sponsored method for student feedback.
- Debated potential general education learning outcomes with a draft completed in May 2012
- Five-member team attended the AAC&U General Education Assessment Institute in June 2012. The goal of the team during the institute was to develop assessment tools necessary to provide data adequate for accreditation and to determine approaches that may overcome the barriers of lack of enthusiasm and ownership. At the conclusion of the AAC&U General Education Institute the team was confident that the general education learning outcomes, which had been drafted in May, were appropriate and measureable. They also concluded that modification of the existing AAC&U VALUE rubrics would be used as an assessment tool for those learning outcomes. Additionally, the institute team agreed to begin a pilot study in Fall 2013 to collect data on at least one learning outcome in a small number of courses and to use the data collected to not only assess student learning as determined by the assessment tool, but also to assess the value of that assessment tool.

Institution Involvement

Describe how the institution involved people in work on this Action Project

The Phase I task force represented Academic Affairs administration, Director of Accreditation and Assessment, Registrar and academic department heads and faculty. Phase II added a representative of students as well as the newly elected faculty of the General Education Council. One distinction from earlier reform efforts is in regards to committee membership. In the previous Liberal Studies Senate subcommittee, members were appointed based upon contract requirement of service; it was not uncommon for an appointee to have little interest in Liberal Studies. The new election process included short biographical statements written by nominees to explain their interest in serving on the Council. The elected members are highly respected faculty who are very committed to improving general education at NMU.

Next Steps

Describe your planned next steps for this Action Project

The original target completion date of December 1, 2013 was found to be unfeasible and will be revised to June 30, 2014. While a core of task force members from Phase I proceeded with Phase II, the new General Education Council was not in place until March 2013. This delayed debate and decision-making on learning outcomes beyond the April Senate meeting dates. Senate approval of learning outcomes is deemed necessary for successful acceptance of any assessment plan. The revised activities and timetable were developed and accepted by the task force:

- Summer 2013 – finalize general education learning outcomes and develop specific assessment rubrics
- Sept 2013 – present new general education learning outcomes and rubrics to Senate for Approval
- Fall 2013 – develop learning outcomes assessment plan
- Fall 2013/Winter 2014 – conduct a trial run with approved rubrics using a small selection of general education sections taught by instructors willing to volunteer and receive training
- Winter 2014 – Present General Education Learning Outcomes Assessment Plan to Senate for Approval
- Winter 2014 – Develop trainings, processes, timelines, and forms for collection and submission of assessment data and course review process
- Winter/Summer 2014 – Train all general education instructors and departments on the assessment plan and use of rubrics

Resulting Effective Practices

Describe any "effective practice(s)" that resulted from your work on this Action Project

- The creation of a new position for Associate Dean of General Education gave all stakeholders a sense of administrative commitment.
- Including administrative, faculty, staff and student representatives on the task force permitted much earlier indication of problems and acceptance by all parties than the earlier faculty-only Senate subcommittee.
- Surveying the faculty gave the task force an opportunity to explain the Action Project's purpose and rationale. Using these survey results and best practices may reduce resistance of the final proposal.
- The task force met weekly or bi-weekly from January through May with a team attending the June AAC&U institute and a debriefing meeting in mid-June. Each meeting had a clear agenda and assigned tasks.

Project Challenges

What challenges, if any, are you still facing in regards to this Action Project? This is an opportunity to get constructive, actionable feedback and advice from our review process. Use this question to specify where your blocks, gaps, sticking points, or problems are. If you have already fashioned strategies to deal with any challenge you face, share both the challenge and your strategy for meeting it. If you would like to discuss the possibility of AQIP providing you help beyond the review process, explain your need(s) and tell us whom to contact and when.

A unified vision of general education reform has not yet emerged and discussion is on-going concerning the development of valid assessment methods. Ideas garnered from the AAC&U General Education Assessment Institute and other best practices are providing models, but we must still overcome current attitudinal barriers related to general education that are resulting in low enthusiasm: lack of general education assessment ownership and consequences if assessment is not done or learning goals not met; territorialism and a defensive stance on general education assessment results; and sufficient belief that assessment will make a difference or add value. The Task Force believes these challenges will be overcome by deliberate navigation and staying with the scheduled project activities to develop a good product, give a clear presentation and provide effective training.

Annual Update

REASON FOR COMPLETION

What is the primary reason for closing this project?

The goals of this Action Project were 1) to review and reframe the general education learning outcomes, 2) adopt or develop assessment methods, 3) create a new process and procedure for conducting the assessment of the learning outcomes, and 4) apply the results. All necessary actions identified in this Action Project have been completed, or are very near completion. Therefore, the project was closed.

SUCCESS FACTORS

What aspects of this project would you categorize as successful?

Beyond successfully completing the Project goals which were significant in scope, Project activities directly and successfully addressed the campus attitudinal obstacles and overall lack of enthusiasm identified in the Annual Report. In response to the obstacles that existed on NMU campus, the General Education Council engaged in the following actions:

- Defined the obstacles associated with General Education reform; including the history associated with previous attempts at reform
- Held several public forums for staff, faculty and students where plans were presented and exchange of ideas took place
- Presented elements of the proposed plan to all individual academic departments on campus, offering an opportunity for faculty to discuss questions specific to their programs.
- Encouraged faculty, staff and students to leave their opinions regarding proposed General Education models on the campus intranet. Results were reviewed by the committee and adjustments were made based in the input received
- Responded to numerous face-to-face inquiries from faculty, staff and students as well as frequent email messages regarding the proposed changes
- Encouraged interest of students through the use of student media and involvement in student government, leading to strong student support of general education reform

After careful planning to include all campus stakeholders and maintaining focus on student learning, the General Education Council presented a proposal to the Academic Senate that included new learning outcomes, an appropriate assessment plan and a new General Education structure. The plan was approved by a majority vote of the Academic Senate. The processes adopted by the General Education Council will serve as a template for any future updating and reform that becomes necessary at NMU. Clearly, the processes employed by the General Education Council were successful in overcoming many of the obstacles identified in the Annual Report.

Although the original Project goals included the development of assessment models and a procedure for conducting assessment of learning outcomes, the General Education Council also was successful in opening a larger dialog with faculty based on the General Education Council's principles of involving all stakeholders, communicating often and effectively, and focusing assessment tasks on student learning.

UNSUCCESSFUL FACTORS

What aspects of this project would you categorize as less than successful?

The Project fell short of completing all actions identified in the Annual Update. Specifically, while several faculty members participated in “trial” submission of assessment data, formal training activities have not yet been established for the remainder of the faculty. These activities will begin as faculty return to campus for the Fall 2014 semester.

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