

RATIONALE FOR CHANGING THE GENERAL EDUCATION SLO STRUCTURE

BACKGROUND

The General Education program is currently organized around 28 student learning outcomes (SLOs) arranged in six categories. The General Education Committee recently approved a recommendation to restructure and streamline these learning outcomes. This recommendation was made in consultation with the General Education Assessment Committee (GEAC) and the Assessment Coordinator.

In summary, the committee has re-written each of the six categories to read as a SLO and then eliminated the sub-categories. Specifically, the recommendation is to adopt the following six student learning outcomes.

Students will demonstrate knowledge and abilities relating to:

- 1. human cultures and the natural world;**
- 2. critical and creative thinking;**
- 3. aesthetic perspectives and meaning;**
- 4. effective communication;**
- 5. interaction in intercultural contexts;**
- 6. individual, social, and environmental responsibility.**

These are broad learning outcomes for the program as a whole; an individual course is not required to address an entire learning outcome. For instance, a given course may address “only” critical or creative thinking, it does not need to address both. Information about more specific, course-level learning outcomes which would fall within each of these broad learning outcomes will be made available on the GEAC website.

RATIONALE

The committee explicitly discussed a variety of reasons for restructuring the General Education SLOs. A summary of these discussions follows.

SIMPLIFICATION

The newly proposed structure streamlines the General Education program for administrative purposes and enhances the perception that the program is both coherent and comprehensible.

The current structure involves 28 SLOs, each of which must be administered and explained in a variety of contexts. For example:

- GEC maintains a listing of each General Education course and a listing of each SLO that the course addresses.
- GEAC is tasked with ensuring that each course assesses one of these SLOs within a three-year time frame and then generates a report that includes a per-SLO breakdown of results. One item of relevance is that GEAC reports that several SLOs have *never been assessed* and that several more are *rarely assessed*.
- The Assessment Coordinator is responsible for reporting SLO data to external agencies.
- General Education courses are expected to articulate, both to GEC and GEAC, how their course-specific content directly aligns with the SLO(s) the course chooses to assess.
- Faculty are expected to communicate the General Education program to students in a way that emphasizes both the importance and coherence of the program.

GEC generally views the current structure as overly complex and administratively cumbersome. The proposal attempts to eliminate unnecessary complexity while retaining the fundamental structure.

ALIGNMENT WITH UWS SHARED LEARNING GOALS

The current SLO structure was meant to align with the UW System Shared Learning Goals. These goals are based on the Essential Learning Outcomes developed by the Liberal Education and America's Promise (LEAP) program of the American Association of Colleges and Universities. The UW System's Shared Learning Goals were adopted by the UWS Board of Regents as a framework that each UWS institution is expected to embrace. The current structure uses these five shared learning goals as categories that are then defined by the specific SLO's within the category. The current structure adds a sixth category that is related to aesthetic perspective.

There are 5 UW System shared goals that are listed below:

- Knowledge of Human Cultures and the Natural World
- Critical and Creating Thinking Skills
- Effective Communication Skills
- Intercultural Knowledge and Competence
- Individual, Social and Environmental Responsibility

The newly proposed structure retains explicit alignment with the shared learning goals.

INCREASED FLEXIBILITY

Since each of the categories in the current system is defined exclusively by the associated list of SLOs, each General Education course is expected to address these (relatively narrow) SLOs exactly as they are written. The newly proposed structure lists only 6 SLOs that are more generally phrased than any of the current SLOs. Under this proposal, GEC will expect courses to articulate, in their own words, how the course will assess a single SLO. The existing SLOs will be retained in reference materials on the GEC website, to provide a set of examples for how students could achieve a particular SLO in a given class. GEC anticipates that courses will have more freedom in addressing the over-arching aims of the General Education program.

The newly proposed structure is meant to allow courses a greater flexibility to operationalize the more generally framed SLOs in a manner that may be more appropriate for a specific discipline or program.

CONTINUITY

The current SLO structure carries a significant amount of infrastructural support. Committees are charged with managing the SLO structure (GEC and GEAC), policies and procedures directly address the SLO structure, the entire General Education curricular structure is (ostensibly) understood and organized around the SLOs and courses explicitly reference and operationalize the SLOs.

Few, if any of the existing committees, policies, procedures, or general understandings are expected to change under the new structure. Consider the following:

- GEC approves courses for inclusion into the General Education program. The current expectation is that each General Education course address at least one (and possibly several) SLOs at a level that is appropriate for a general audience¹. GEC will maintain precisely this expectation with the caveat that since the SLOs are more generally phrased, it may result in courses addressing only one (rather than several) SLOs since the several SLOs that a course may address under the current system *may* all fall under the same category. GEC has apparently not taken an interest in either distributing courses equally across the current SLOs; nor in having the same number of SLOs in each category; nor in targeting a distribution that might reflect the relative importance of the SLOs in the program. In this sense, the number of SLOs addressed by a course has no real significance. While there is likely a *perception* that the more SLOs a course claims to address, the more likely the course is to remain in the program; this perception does not appear to have any logically sustainable basis.
- GEAC assesses each course according to the SLOs. The current process involves a web-based system for submitting assessment data to GEAC. The software system requires little change to accommodate the proposed revision. The major change from an administrative perspective is that GEAC will have only six reporting categories rather than 28.
- Assessment reports from previous years may be reasonably compared to assessment data generated under the new scheme since previous data can be aggregated under the six categories.
- Assessment tasks and rubrics designed to assess one of the original, narrower SLOs will all be equally applicable to the assessment of one of the new, broader SLOs. This will allow for continuity as departments evaluate the effect of course revisions and other responses to previous assessment efforts.

The newly proposed structure maintains nearly complete continuity with the current structure.

¹ GEC gives the following guidance when proposing a course for inclusion (quoted from a document entitled 'Guidelines for Proposing General Education Courses' drawn from the UWL gen-ed web page): *Proposers should carefully choose the most appropriate distribution of SLOs for the content and learning activities of the course. ... Most courses at UW-L can meet several General Education SLOs even though the material is too discipline specific to be considered general education. Courses should be designed for a general audience, and with a relatively broad perspective.*