General Studies Assessment  
*(proposed*) Strategic Plan 2010-2014

This strategic plan for Assessment of General Studies at University of Nebraska Kearney (UNK) is based on input from the Advancement Section of the Higher Learning Commission’s feedback report from the focused visit in 2008, information on the expectations of the HLC for our next accreditation visit in 2014, and current practices in assessment in Higher Education in the U.S.

**Background**

The assessment of General Studies was found to be problematic by the evaluation team of the Higher Learning Commission during the 2008 Focused Visit. Despite the efforts of the Assessment Office, the General Studies Director and Council, and departments and faculty across campus to address GS Assessment issues from the 2004 Accreditation Visit, the HLC continued to find problems with the department-based approach being used to assess General Studies at UNK. This continuing dissatisfaction resulted in a Commission sanction and the requirement for a progress report on GS Assessment in April of 2011. The progress report will cover the new program’s structure, student learning outcomes, an assessment plan, and the implementation status for each of the outcomes.

The HLC evaluator’s comments in the feedback report focused on the need for the following changes in General Studies Assessment:

1. Consistent interpretation of GS learning outcomes across departments
2. Common methods and instruments used to measure GS outcomes
3. Standardized rubrics used to evaluate performance

**GS Learning Outcomes**

According to the HLC Evaluator: *As it stands, there does not appear to be a clear, shared definition, nor understanding of the learning outcomes for the General Studies program.*

To address this issue, standardized learning outcomes have been developed and will be used by all GS courses offered in the new program beginning in Fall, 2010. These learning outcomes were developed and refined over a three year period with the involvement of many faculty on campus. The initial list of learning outcomes was developed by the GS Roundtable in 2006 and was shared with faculty across the campus.

The GS Council considered this input from the Roundtable, as well as that of other sources and identified a set of learning outcomes for the entire GS Program by spring 2009. These were shared with faculty to obtain feedback and the outcomes were finalized for inclusion in the proposed GS courses by fall 2009.

All faculty teaching GS courses are required to list the relevant program and area level learning outcomes in their course syllabi and to collect assessment data on these learning outcomes during the course. Adherence to these requirements will be monitored by the GS Director and Council. Courses not adhering will be identified and the department/faculty will be given the opportunity to meet the requirements. If requirements are not met, the course will be dropped from the GS Program.
Implementation of common learning outcomes with shared definitions occurred in fall 2009 and became an integral part of all GS courses beginning in 2010 and will continue for the foreseeable future. Revision of learning outcomes is possible over time as formative assessment data are collected in the new program.

Common Assessment Methods and Instruments
The HLC evaluators found that: *Each department that is teaching courses in General Studies is assessing their interpretation of the outcomes in their own way, using their own instruments. As such, it is impossible to determine whether UNK students are achieving at an acceptable level when the level shifts from course to course, and program to program.*

Addressing this issue required the development of common assessment assignments that can be used to evaluate each of the learning outcomes identified for the program. These items are generic enough to be used across disciplines, but provide some flexibility so faculty can determine the specific content that is evaluated in their course. One assignment, designated as GS assessment, will be required in each GS course and will be part of each student’s grade in the course. Faculty will have six different assessment assignments they can choose from to fit their course. These all address the common learning outcomes and provide consistent assessment of those outcomes. The set of common GS assessment assignments will provide consistency in the types of assessment measures being used in the UNK GS Program. Evaluation of the items will also provide comparable data that will provide valid answers to the question, “What are our GS students learning?”

Implementation of common assessment measures throughout the GS Program will begin in fall 2010 with the Portal Courses and will be in place in all GS courses by 2012. The common assessments will be implemented in each area by the semester indicated to insure assessment data are reported in all areas by fall 2013.

1. Portal courses--fall 2010
2. American Democracy and Capstone courses--spring 2011
3. Foundation Courses and Distribution courses--fall 2011

Changes to the common assessment assignments selected or additional items may occur as a result of the formative evaluations that will be ongoing over the next several years. In addition to the common assessment items, General Studies will continue to use the ACT Collegiate Assessment of Academic Proficiency (CAAP) standardized tests of Essay Writing and Critical Thinking to provide program level assessment of two of the major program level outcomes that can be measured with standardized instruments.

Implementation of CAAP in the GS Program began in fall 2007 when the two tests were first administered to a random sample of freshman and seniors. The schedule for administering CAAP as part of GS assessment follows a 3-year cycle and will be administered again in:

- Fall 2010 in selected Portal courses for freshman input and in Spring 2011 in senior level courses to provide input from seniors who are within 6 months of graduation (for VSA)
Standardized Rubrics
Following their visit, the HLC evaluators indicated that: Many assessment “rubrics” are simply numerical scales, without descriptions of performance characteristics at each level. Creating standard rubrics for the outcomes would be a tremendous help when it comes time for assessing student achievement.

In addressing this concern of the evaluators, we conducted research to identify rubrics that could be used across the GS Program to evaluate students’ performance, and that have been pilot tested to insure face validity and reliability.

The common rubrics that have been identified to assess the six program level learning outcomes for General Studies at UNK were developed as part of the American Association of Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) VALUE project. As part of the VALUE project, teams of faculty and other academic and student affairs professionals from across the country engaged in an iterative process over eighteen months. They gathered, analyzed, synthesized, and then drafted institutional level rubrics for 15 of the AAC&U Essential Learning Outcomes, creating the set of VALUE rubrics.

The rubric development teams relied on existing campus rubrics when available, other organizational statements on outcomes, experts in the respective fields and faculty feedback from campuses throughout the process. Each VALUE rubric contains the most common and broadly shared criteria or core characteristics considered critical for judging the quality of student work in that outcome area. The VALUE rubrics reflect faculty expectations for essential learning across the nation regardless of type of institution, mission, size or location.

All GS courses are required to incorporate one or more of the six program level learning outcomes. When the students in a GS course are given the common assessment assignment used to evaluate these outcomes, their performance will be evaluated using these standardized rubrics. Faculty using the rubrics for scoring will be trained on the use of the rubric to insure a common understanding of the descriptions of performance for each of the items in the rubric and to encourage greater inter-rater reliability.

Implementation of the standardized rubrics in the GS Program will begin in fall 2010 with the Portal Courses and will be in place in all GS courses by 2012. The process follows the same schedule as that of the implementation of common assessment items, since the rubrics will be used to evaluate those items

1. Portal courses--fall 2010
2. American Democracy and Capstone courses—spring 2011
3. Foundation and Distribution Courses--fall 2011

Revisions or changes in the standardized rubrics may occur as a result of the formative evaluations that will be ongoing during the next four years.
e-Portfolios for Grading and Reporting of GS Assessment Results
Data collection and analysis for assessment reporting in General Studies, requires a more efficient method than sharing of assignment results and tallying of the results. In addition, GS would like to be able to do some longitudinal analysis for assessment. As a result, the decision was made to adopt an e-portfolio system for the archiving of student assessment assignments and for the ease of on-line grading and compiling of results. The application adopted for GS at UNK is TaskStream, which is already being used by College of Education as their e-portfolio system for majors.

All students entering the GS program and taking their portal course will be required to purchase a 4-year license for TaskStream. For each GS course that students take, beginning with the Portal, they will be required to upload their GS assessment assignment. This will provide an efficient way to handle all the assessment assignments and will provide faculty an easy way to grade the assignments using the required rubric which will be available to them in TaskStream. The grading of the assignments in TaskStream allows the Director of GS to compile the results from all GS courses and be able to perform any required data analysis on the results for reporting purposes.

Implementation of the TaskStream e-portfolio will begin in Fall 2010 when students taking GS Portal courses are required to purchase a 4-year license to TaskStream. Eventually all students in the new GS program will have e-portfolios for collection, grading, and reporting of all their GS assessment assignments from all their GS courses.

Goal of the new GS Assessment Process
In the HLC report following the 2008 visit, the evaluators provided the following insights and positive feedback about the current General Studies renewal process.

In many ways, UNK is in the enviable position of being able to create a truly outcomes-based General Studies program. Most schools wind up trying to retrofit learning outcomes onto an existing General Studies program that was never meant to actually function as a program. While possible, this approach often yields outcome that are vague and unmeasurable. A careful, systematic approach could yield a program that can serve as a model for other schools looking for a best-practice model in General Studies.