Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities

Progress Report
Assessment of General Education (Core Curriculum)

GONZAGA UNIVERSITY
Spokane, Washington

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Introduction

In its letter dated July 7, 2009, the Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities requested that Gonzaga University submit a written progress report by October 15, 2010, related to University Core Curriculum assessment. Specifically, the recommendation this report responds to is:

*The University needs to create a faculty-based program for assessing general education in light of identified learning outcomes. The program needs to be systematic and linked to institutional planning (Standard 2.B.1; Policy 2.2).*

This recommendation emerged from a Regular Interim Report for Reaffirmation of Accreditation that took place on the Gonzaga Campus in the spring of 2009 (report by evaluators Marvin Henberg and Carol S. Long, April 27-28, 2009). While the report commended Gonzaga on its response to advising, recent financial decisions, distance education development, and increasing trust between faculty and administration as evidenced by progress made in programmatic assessment, core curriculum review and faculty governance, it also included the above recommendation.

On June 10, 2010, Gonzaga submitted a formal response to the Evaluators Report, providing additional information and support to show that the institution was in fact meeting the Commission’s standards for faculty-based systematic assessment of general education linked to institutional planning. On July 4, 2009, the Commission informed Gonzaga that accreditation had been reaffirmed but required a progress report addressing the above recommendation because the Commission believed that Gonzaga needed to continue to improve its general education assessment.

At Gonzaga, the “general education requirements” are formally and commonly referred to as the “University Core Curriculum,” or simply, “Core Curriculum.” Below follows a description of what we have done and are doing in our effort to continue and build on prior assessment work related to our University Core Curriculum.
Report of Progress in Creating a Faculty-based General Education Assessment Program

Roughly two years prior to receiving the July 2009 recommendation, Gonzaga had begun an institution-wide effort to reconsider its Core Curriculum. That effort has now resulted in commonly-agreed-upon Baccalaureate Learning Outcomes that will serve as the constant for systematic assessment of the student experience with the University Core; furthermore, in keeping with our continued strategic planning, it will culminate in a revitalized as well as thoughtfully and continually assessed Core Curriculum.

Establishing Baccalaureate Learning Outcomes

More than three years ago, we began gathering the academic community's thinking about the Core Curriculum and identifying common threads. Within the context of our Mission Statement, shaped by our tradition of Jesuit pedagogy, and measured against the LEAP Learning Outcomes, the University Core Committee (made up of faculty members from all the undergraduate academic schools), in time, developed Baccalaureate Learning Outcomes (see Appendix A); tested them out in the context of the AAC&U’s Greater Expectations Institute; created a vetting process by faculty, students, staff, parents, trustees, regents and members of our larger community; and achieved their approval by the Academic Council. More recently, faculty members were invited to explore a large variety of core curricula from around the nation and map them against our Baccalaureate Learning Outcomes in our ongoing effort to educate faculty about curricular options even as they engaged in implicit and explicit assessment of our current Core’s effectiveness through this process. This educational effort is continuing during fall semester 2010 as we draw as many colleagues as possible into a hands-on exploration of core models and a greater awareness of the strengths and weaknesses of our present Core Curriculum.

Simultaneously, the University Core Curriculum Committee is developing a model Core Curriculum for vetting by the entire Gonzaga community in the spring semester of 2011. This model will emerge from a consistent effort to ensure that our colleagues in the co-curriculum participate in shaping all aspects of what we are calling “The Core Experience,” the essential integrated center and base for the totality of the undergraduate educational experiences in which all our students will participate. The institution’s commitment to a revised Core Curriculum and the connection between that revision and strategic planning is demonstrated in a proposal for what is envisioned as an endowed Core Curriculum; this proposal is at the heart of the capital campaign being planned currently to coincide with Gonzaga’s 125th Anniversary (to be celebrated in two years), by which time we anticipate having the revised Core Curriculum in place. Further reflecting the symbiosis of the Core work and strategic planning was last year’s appointment Dr. Patricia Terry, Associate Professor of English, as Core Director. Dr. Terry has been active in the Core revision process from its beginning as the Co-chair of our Core Curriculum Committee. We envision that by the fall of 2011 this will be a half-time position—full time by the fall of 2012 when we anticipate that our revised Core will be in place. We also plan to apply for participation in a second Greater Expectations Institute in the summer of 2011, as we prepare for final vetting of the model Core.

Continued Assessment Efforts

When the “Thought and Expression” block (3 credits of composition, 2 credits of logic, 2 credits of speech; required of all students) was first introduced at Gonzaga more than twenty-five years ago,
Perhaps the most important long-range impact of our work has been the progress we have made toward creating a culture of assessment on our campus. This has taken and continues to take a variety of forms. The Teagle grant that has allowed us to collaborate with Seattle University for the past several years on improving the quality of academic majors through thoughtful embedded assignments has had a direct impact on our Core thinking and assessment. By the time the grant runs out in December of 2011, all of the departments which currently contribute directly to the it was conceived as a set of linked courses. Over time, the block was split up by individual students for various reasons and has only been revived as linked courses in the past few years (also by Dr. Terry). The assessment we have done on the linked sets over the last five semesters has shown, to focus on only one example of what we are learning, that students enrolled in linked sections in the fall (i.e., as first-semester college students) consistently report markedly higher perceptions of being part of a community of learners, as well as of the positive impact of the linked sections on their learning, than do students enrolled in linked sections in the spring—by which time they have had the opportunity to participate in and create multiple other relationships that seem to support their learning. The data also shows marked differences in these metrics from one linked section to another, providing opportunity to explore what approaches by the most effective instructors seem to results in more positive responses by students (see Appendix B). Our analysis of the data helps us to close the assessment loop for this important part of our current Core, encourages us to increase the number of linked sections, and informs the Core Curriculum revision conversation, as the assessment supports the model of integrative learning as a high impact practice.

Individual Core Departments are making significant progress in applying thoughtful assessment techniques to specifying learning outcomes for their Core courses and their majors, as well as creating rubrics to establish common standards and student expectations (see Appendix C for the English 101, Composition, learning outcomes agreed upon by the department; Appendix D for English Department writing assessment rubrics; and Appendix E for Philosophy Department learning outcomes for Core classes). As departments gather annual data, we are gaining information that will allow us to establish clear benchmarks and objectives and to close the loop by connecting our learning outcomes with the data, resulting in consistent program assessment and improvement. The revised Core Curriculum as currently envisioned will, of course, begin with clear learning outcomes, rubrics and assessment processes built in.

In addition, we began surveying our recent graduates’ experience of the University Core several years ago and will continue to do so each year. The surveys have provided us with various initial conclusions, e.g.: that our students do not differentiate between the University Core and the cores of their schools and consequently do not provide us with a consistent sense of their Core experience; that their perception of the University Core reflects a “halo” effect, meaning that they credit the Core with things the Core does not contain or do—for example, they attribute a coherent theme to the courses that make up the Core, even though there is no such theme (see Appendix F). The data supports the importance of intentionality in designing our revised Core, as we emphasize that intentionality and imagine the forms it might take. While we have historically not been prone to using the data we have available to us from assessment tools such as CIRP and NSSE, we have begun to explore the meaning of these data sources and are designing better optional questions in those tools to learn what we need to know to improve our students’ learning experience. In other words, we continue to build on the assessment work we have done and increase the scope and the sophistication of that work as it shapes our thinking about our Core Curriculum.

**Institutional Commitment to an Assessment Culture**

Perhaps the most important long-range impact of our work has been the progress we have made toward creating a culture of assessment on our campus. This has taken and continues to take a variety of forms. The Teagle grant that has allowed us to collaborate with Seattle University for the past several years on improving the quality of academic majors through thoughtful embedded assignments has had a direct impact on our Core thinking and assessment. By the time the grant runs out in December of 2011, all of the departments which currently contribute directly to the
University Core will have participated in this work. While the grant’s focus has been on assessing the major, it has undeniably shaped our thinking about the Core, particularly in the Department of Philosophy, in which the vast majority of courses serve the Core, even as they support the students majoring in the department. Thus, in exploring what, if anything, is missing in their major program, faculty members are identifying consistent learning outcomes and developing assessment measures for the courses which are required of all Gonzaga students as part of their University Core. Even in departments in which the Core does not play as large a role as it does in Philosophy, the Teagle thinking has led to better understanding and delivery of Core courses; for example, in the English Department, the embedded assignments have been placed in Core courses because the missing skills seem to be best addressed in lower division courses. This has, in turn, lead to clearer formulation of course outcomes that inevitably shape the University core for majors and non-majors alike. The assessment part of this work, of course, provides assessment data for the Core, as well.

Other indicators of movement toward an assessment culture are reflected in making the Core revision work the responsibility of senior faculty in the middle, versus the waning years, of their careers (hence, the appointment of Dr. David Boose, Director of our Center for Teaching and Advising, as the Co-chair of the Committee); engaging more and more willing colleagues in deep thinking about learning outcomes and their subsequent assessment; and sending faculty in increasing numbers to national conferences dealing with curricular development and assessment (during the 2010-11 academic year we envision between 8 and 10 colleagues attending such conferences). The institution continues to devote a half day each fall semester to Learning Assessment Day (LeAD), when we cancel classes and devote ourselves to institutional and departmental assessment thinking, relying for presentations that emerge from progress experienced by our own colleagues, or on the wisdom of external experts. This year, for example, we are bringing in Ann Colby, nationally known for her work on assessing value-based education in pre-professional programs; she will provide a new perspective to our colleagues across the institution on what they correctly perceive to be very difficult work.

In addition, four Gonzaga colleagues have recently published an article in Assessment Update, precisely on the topic of how we moved from a top-down assessment effort to a bottom-up process of attaining a culture of assessment (see Appendix G). Gonzaga is investing itself financially in assessment work in multiple ways: for example, in funding stipends for our summer workshops in which faculty members explored various Core models, as well as sending faculty members to pertinent conferences, including partial funding for the Greater Expectations Institute in the summer of 2009. At the present time, we are re-examining institutional decisions about effective assessment and use of that data. Currently, the University employs a fulltime staff member as coordinator of outcomes assessment. Two other members of the Academic Vice President's office are data analysts who produce numbers-based reports used by the Core Committee and others in evaluation of the current Core Curriculum. These "in kind" contributions to systematic University Core Curriculum assessment are buttressed by resources built into the AVP budget to support the Core Curriculum review process in conjunction with more general assessment initiatives.

University Cabinet members have rethought the entire Institutional Research/Assessment relationship and how best to restructure those efforts (defining job responsibilities and hiring to respond to our needs) so that we can not only meet but exceed the demands that our next accreditation cycle (which has already begun) places on us. This restructuring will include giving robust institutional research the appropriate role in assessment and planning; making the Assessment Committee of the Academic Council even more integral to academic program assessment (see Appendices H and I for samples of annual departmental assessment reports in two
A&S departments); redefining and strengthening the role of the University Registrar in academic assessment; making productive connections between e-portfolios, Core assessment, program assessment, our business software and our data collection systems; and consistently supporting an ever more deeply rooted culture of assessment at Gonzaga.
Conclusion

We wish to express our gratitude to the Commission for not only allowing us but urging us to be our best selves through a thoughtful Gonzaga-based accreditation process. It has made us and continues to make us a better institution. We feel as if we are in the middle of things, continuing to assess our old Core even as we envision our new one, and using the assessment of the old Core to shape, in part, that Core of the future. At the same time we are beginning our next accreditation cycle, developing our Core Themes, and creating the institutional structure and the cooperation that will allow us to make the best possible use of this accreditation effort. We are experiencing a change of culture and, as we all know, change is difficult but, at the same time, it is energizing and revitalizing. We look forward to applying the new standards of the Commission to our new University Core Curriculum and all of our work, as we learn from this process that has informed our work. We are certain that we have made and continue to make consistent progress and that Gonzaga will be the better for it.