

**COMMON QUESTIONS:  
ASSESSMENT of GENERAL EDUCATION COURSES**

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**1. WHAT AM I ASSESSING?**

You are assessing the general education goals that the course addresses. These general education goals appear on the course syllabus in all sections of the course. The General Education Committee needs an honest assessment of how well students master relevant goals, so that it can revise, remove, or add goals in the future. Therefore, the assessment items should be designed to measure student, not instructor, ability at the end of the course.

**2. WHAT ARE ASSESSMENT ITEMS?**

Assessment items are test items. We are assessing, or testing, what students have learned. Thus, faculty, as experts in their discipline, develop the assessment items. The process of developing assessment items differs from the process of developing test items.

| <b>Tests</b>  | <b>Assessments</b>   |
|---|--|
| Different instructors may have different learning objectives for the same course.   | Instructors come to a shared understanding of the “core” material for a course. All instructors have the same core learning objectives for the same course.                      |
| Instructors develop their own test items to address their learning objectives.  | Instructors collaborate to develop common assessment items that address the common core learning objectives.   |
| Instructors may develop test items without explicitly thinking about which “part” of the learning objective the item measures.  | Instructors must understand, a priori, the “parts” of the learning objectives, and then develop assessment items that measure each part, separately.                             |
| Test scores may not give instructors feedback regarding specific parts of a course. Instructors may not have enough information to know what parts of the course to change and what parts to leave alone. | Assessment scores give instructors feedback regarding each part of a course. Course changes are based on student performance on the separate parts of the assessment instrument. |
| Instructors may teach course material that other instructors do not teach, as long as the “core” material is taught.  | Same   |
| Instructors may have the freedom to develop their own test items.   | Instructors may have the freedom to add additional items to the assessment instrument.   |

### **3. WHY NOT JUST USE COURSE GRADES?**

Course grades are based on a combination of various course assignments. A student who makes a “B” in a course may have earned an “A” on three exams, and a “D” on a research paper. The global grade of “B” provides no information regarding in which “parts,” of the course the student performed better or worse. On the other hand, assessment results for this student might indicate that he/she performed well only on lower-level thinking tasks, such as comprehension of information, which is often assessed via exams. Assessment results might show that this same student performed poorly on higher-level thinking tasks, such as integration of material, which might be assessed via a literature review section of a research paper.

### **4. HOW DO WE KNOW ASSESSMENT ITEMS ARE VALID?**

The issue of validity (do items measure the construct accurately?) is no different for an assessment instrument than it is for a test. One type of validity that is important for academic tests is *content validity*, which refers to whether assessment items (or test items) reflect a specific domain of content. Thus, assessment items for a math course might include decisions regarding which formulas to use, calculations of equations, and interpretations of results. By creating assessment items that fit each criterion on the Course Assessment Grading Rubrics, assessment items are likely to have better content validity than many tests. Ultimately, the validity of the assessment instrument reflects that knowledge base of the people who created it. This is why assessment instruments should be created by faculty experts. When a group of experts collaborate on creating assessment items, the validity is likely to be better than when only one expert creates items.

### **5. HOW DO WE DEVELOP AN ASSESSMENT INSTRUMENT?**

First, Departments should strive to involve as many faculty as possible in the creation of an assessment instrument. Faculty should discuss what they perceive as the important aspects of a course, note the commonalities, and agree on a “core set” of course material. Faculty should then collaborate on developing assessment items that (a) measure this core set of material, and (b) fit the criteria on the Course Assessment Grading Rubrics.

Second, faculty should discuss the procedure for administering the assessment items. The assessment items should be an exam or assignment (or embedded in) that is given later in the semester in order to test what students have learned in the course. All faculty should give the assessment at a similar time and in a similar context. Students should be told the same thing about the assessment – specifically, NOTHING that you would not normally say about an exam. It is not necessary to tell students that X% of this exam is assessment of GE course objectives. To some degree, every exam in GE courses should be measuring the GE course objectives. From a student’s point of view there is no difference between assessment items and test items.

## 6. HOW DO WE GRADE THE ASSESSMENT ITEMS?

Individual faculty should grade their students' assessment items, use the score as part of the students' grade, and use the overall results to determine potential strengths and weaknesses of his/her individual course. This individual grading may or may not be standardized. For example, if the assessment involves a research paper, one faculty member might decide to weight the literature review 30%, while another faculty member may weight the literature review only 10%. However, these scores are for the individual faculty members' use; they are not the scores that are reported for assessment purposes.

For purposes of reporting assessment results, data from all sections should be aggregated. Thus, instructors might submit to a committee all the assessment exams/papers. That committee might select a random sample (some from each section) and grade (or re-grade) the items according to the Course Assessment Grading Rubrics. At least two faculty members should grade several assignments to check for reliability in grading procedures. If grading appears to be reliable for several assignments, then one faculty person could grade each assignment, while collaborating with the other grader when necessary.

**How many students' assignment do we need to grade?** If the assignment is easy to grade (multiple choice), then grading all of the students' work is desirable. If the assignment is more time-consuming to grade, then choose a random sample of 20% of the population, with a minimum of 30 students. You do NOT need to have the same sample size for each criterion. For example, if your assessment instrument includes multiple choice items to measure "Comprehension," and an essay to measure "Integration," then you might report all students' scores for "Comprehension," and 30 students' scores for integration. What you should NOT do is choose 30 students' assignments to grade for "integration," and a different 30 students for "Application." Thus, you can report ALL students' scores, a random sample, or a mix of the two, but the same random sample must be used for all criteria for which the entire population is not used.

## 7. HOW OFTEN SHOULD WE ASSESS STUDENTS?

Requirement: You are required to assess every two years, or at least twice during the four year period for which your GE courses are approved. The assessment schedule can be viewed at [www.gened.eku.edu](http://www.gened.eku.edu)

Recommendation: Although you are required to assess every two years, I encourage you to assess every time the course is taught. This may be easier than it sounds. For example, if your department develops a final exam as an assessment tool, then using that exam every semester eliminates the need for instructors to develop final exams. This may be especially appreciated by part-time instructors.

**Advantages of Assessing Often.** Assessing every time the course is taught will provide you with more opportunities to perfect your assessment items. Faculty know that test items don't always yield useful information. Thus, we constantly modify test items. Assessment items are test items, and they will not be perfect either. Assessing more often will give departments a chance to

modify assessment items as needed, test those items, eventually get useful information, and modify courses based on better assessment items.

Assessing every time the course is taught will provide you with more useful information for course improvement. For example, if assessment results show that students were not able to integrate information, faculty might discuss ways they could modify the course content, emphasis, examples, or assignments to help students learn to integrate. Assessing again the following semester will give faculty timely feedback regarding whether the changes made a difference, and whether to continue with those change and/or make different changes. If you wait for two years, course improvement will be a very slow process.

## **8. WHAT DO WE DO WITH OUR COURSE ASSESSMENT DATA?**

Enter the data into TracDat and submit a TracDat report to the General Education Committee when you apply for recertification of your GE courses (every four years). TracDat guidelines are posted on the General Education website [www.gened.eku.edu](http://www.gened.eku.edu). These guidelines provide detailed instructions for developing learning objectives for your GE course, KPIs, linking to ECU and GE Goals, and entering results. TracDat guidelines have been written specifically for each GE Block.

## **9. WILL AGGREGATED DATA MAKE THE DEPARTMENT LOOK BAD?**

Because assessment data are aggregated across all sections of a course, faculty may be concerned that some weak instructors will make an entire department appear weak. Solution: There is no “rule” that states a department MUST aggregate data across all sections of a course. That guideline is stated only because most departments prefer that individual instructors’ data not be identifiable. Instructors can be anxious about what the assessment data will suggest about their teaching, but the desire of faculty to avoid embarrassment must be balanced with the needs of a department to improve its courses.

It is acceptable, and sometimes quite useful, for departments to report assessment data for groups of faculty/sections of a course. For example, if student performance is much different in some sections than in others, then departments might choose to report results for these two groups separately. The issue of who teaches in group one versus group two is NOT a concern of the GE Assessment Committee, and should not be reported. It should be a concern for department chairs who should use the data to identify faculty who could benefit from professional development activities. A discussion of what attempts were made to provide professional development to instructors could be included in the TracDat report under “use of data.”