

# Liberal Arts Core Assessment Pilot

## Frequently Asked Questions

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**Overview:** The faculty on the Liberal Arts Council (LAC) voted in spring 2016 to develop and implement an assessment of student learning plan for the UNC Liberal Arts Core (Core). The LAC also voted to collaborate with the Faculty Assessment Fellows and UNC Office of Assessment on the assessment of student learning plan. The Faculty Assessment Fellows and Office of Assessment, on behalf of the Council, is implementing an assessment pilot in the 2017-2018 academic year. The following are Frequently Asked Questions about the assessment pilot.

#### 1. What is the purpose of assessing the Liberal Arts Core?

The Liberal Arts Core (Core) is an interdisciplinary general education program in which students are required to complete 40 credit hours across multiple disciplines. Core student learning outcomes describe the foundational learning students should achieve by the time they complete the 40 credit hours. The purpose of assessing the Core is to determine how well and in what ways students are achieving the intended learning outcomes designated for the Core. The purpose is not to evaluate the effectiveness of an individual faculty member or course. .

#### 2. Who is responsible for assessing the Liberal Arts Core?

As per Board policy, “The Liberal Arts Council (LAC) is a representative faculty council . . . that is established to represent and to act on behalf of the faculty in the governance of the Liberal Arts Core (the Core), the University’s general education program” (2-3-107(2)(a)). The LAC holds a number of powers and duties, including the responsibility for developing and implementing a program for assessing the Core (2-3-107(2)(c)(VII)).

#### 3. Why are we doing this now?

- a. **Internal motivators:** In 2014, a UNC self-study conducted in preparation for the 2015 Higher Learning Commission (HLC) accreditation visit found that assessment of the Core had not been conducted in recent years; therefore, no data exist about how well and in what ways students are achieving the intended Core learning outcomes. The self-study identified assessment of the Core as an area for improvement. Also in 2014, Provost Wacker established a Liberal Arts Core Task Force, and that group identified the lack of a systematic assessment process for the Core as one area of improvement (Task Force members – Travis Boyce, Joe Elkins, Nancy Matchett, and Tom Smith).
- b. **External motivators:** The HLC requires accredited institutions to regularly assess their general education programs and to provide evidence that assessment data results are used to make improvements when needed. In addition, Colorado recently revised the Guaranteed Transfer Pathways (gtPathways) learning outcomes and requires that institutions implement and assess these learning outcomes.

#### 4. What is involved in the Liberal Arts Core assessment pilot?

The Liberal Arts Council has decided to conduct a small-scale assessment pilot of the Core, starting with assessment of the critical thinking competency. Critical thinking was selected because it is a required learning outcome for gtPathways courses, and it spans multiple disciplines and courses (all courses in Core areas 3a-c and 5). All faculty teaching courses in these areas during fall 2017 are invited to participate in the project.

In fall 2017, faculty are asked to do the following

- Provide one assignment (i.e., the instructions/description that are provided to students) they will use in their fall 2017 Core course. The assignment must address at least 2 of the gtPathways critical thinking learning outcomes.
- Answer a brief survey about the assignment.
- Provide copies of ungraded student responses to the assignments.
- Answer a brief survey about their experience.

In spring 2018, a team of UNC faculty will be recruited to score the de-identified student responses to the assignments using a rubric developed by the Faculty Assessment Fellows. Faculty perceptions about the process to implement and conduct the pilot will be collected by the Faculty Assessment Fellows and evaluated to identify what aspects of the pilot were effective and what aspects need improvement.

In spring 2018, the Faculty Assessment Fellows will create a report for the LAC that 1) summarizes how well students met the critical thinking learning outcomes using the selected method for assessment; 2) evaluates the effectiveness of the pilot assessment process; and 3) makes recommendations for modifying the pilot to assess the entire Core program. The LAC will use the report to make decisions about adopting the assessment model in the future.

#### 5. What is the project timeline?

| Date           | Action  |
|----------------|---|
| Spring 2016    | • Three Faculty Assessment Fellows appointed to lead project  |
| Fall 2016      | • Faculty Assessment Fellows conducted research on (1) how other universities assess general education and (2) how faculty at UNC assess critical thinking in Core courses.   |
| Spring 2017    | • Faculty Assessment Fellows present recommendation for LAC assessment pilot and present to LAC Assessment Ad Hoc Committee.<br>• Committee recommends adoption by the full Liberal Arts Council.<br>• The Liberal Arts Council approves moving forward with the project.<br>• Faculty teaching in selected courses notified about the project. |
| September 2017 | • Faculty teaching in selected courses emailed with information and instructions about the project.<br>• Faculty Assessment Fellows conduct information sessions about the project.   |
| September 29   | • Deadline for submitting assignments from selected classes.  |
| October 2017   | • Faculty Assessment Fellows review assignments to identify which learning outcomes each assignment addresses.  |

|             |   |
|-------------|---|
| December 30 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Deadline for submitting student artifacts (completed ungraded assignments) from selected classes. Artifacts may be sent electronically or in hard copy.</li> </ul>   |
| Spring 2018 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Assessment office staff remove identifying information from student artifacts and prepare for scoring.</li> <li>• Faculty recruited and trained to score assignments.</li> <li>• Faculty score artifacts.</li> <li>• Faculty Assessment Fellows collect information from participants about their experience.</li> <li>• Faculty Assessment Fellows analyze scoring data and participant feedback to evaluate the pilot.</li> <li>• Faculty Assessment Fellows present report and recommendations to LAC.</li> <li>• The LAC decides whether to adopt the model for future assessment of the Core, revise the model, or investigate a different approach.</li> </ul> |

## 6. How was the Liberal Arts Core assessment pilot developed?

On behalf of the Liberal Arts Council, the Faculty Assessment Fellows researched general education assessment methods for the purpose of providing a recommendation to the LAC during the 2016-2017 academic year. The Faculty Assessment Fellows reviewed common methods (standardized tests, portfolios, and course-embedded) to evaluate student learning in general education. Each method had pros and cons (summarized below). The Faculty Assessment Fellows also researched how UNC faculty assess critical thinking in their courses.

The UNC Faculty Assessment Fellows selected course-embedded assessment as the method most aligned with the UNC context and wrote a report for the LAC Assessment Ad Hoc committee recommending that method. The LAC Assessment Ad Hoc committee reviewed the proposed assessment method and recommended to the full LAC that it approve moving forward with implementation. In spring 2017, the LAC voted on and approved piloting the course-embedded assessment method and asked the UNC Assessment Office and Faculty Assessment Fellows to develop and implement the pilot during the 2017-2018 academic year.

## 7. How will results of the assessment pilot be used?

The Liberal Arts Council and UNC Faculty Assessment Fellows will evaluate the pilot implementation and results (was the pilot manageable, could it be efficiently scaled up to assess all Core learning outcomes, what would it cost for full implementation, etc.). The LAC and Faculty Assessment Fellows will evaluate the type of data produced (are they meaningful, are they valid, do they provide useful insights for improving the Core, etc.).

Results will not be used to evaluate individual students, faculty, classes, or departments. Because this is a pilot and we are testing the process to assess the Core learning outcomes, there will be limitations on interpreting the student results to make conclusions about the effectiveness of the Core in preparing students and in making conclusions about student learning. For this reason, we would not expect the results to be used for any decisions other than whether to adopt the assessment process in the future and how to improve the process if adopted. Any final decisions will be made by the faculty elected to the LAC in fulfillment of their Board Policy responsibilities.

## **8. Why was course-embedded assessment selected for the pilot?**

The most common methods for assessing general education include standardized multiple-choice tests, portfolios, and course-embedded methods. The Faculty Assessment Fellows recommended against using standardized multiple-choice tests based on a number of concerns, including lack of alignment between tests and institutional learning outcomes, inadequacies associated with using multiple-choice tests for assessing higher order learning, concerns about student motivation, costs, and limitations on using the results in any meaningful way.

Portfolios are considered a more authentic form of assessment, as they provide a venue for collecting student work over time and also an opportunity for students to reflect on their own learning. The Faculty Assessment Fellows recommended against using portfolios because of the significant time and other resources required to implement a portfolio-based assessment process. It is a promising method that faculty may want to consider in the future, but right now, it would be very difficult to implement without wide endorsement from faculty.

The Faculty Assessment Fellows recommended the use of course-embedded methods. These are also considered more authentic measures of learning because they use work students complete in their courses. In addition, students may be more motivated to put in their best effort with this method as opposed to standardized tests administered separately from courses. The two most common ways of using course embedded assessment for general education include: (1) course instructors evaluate each student using a common rubric for the specific general education learning outcomes addressed in the course; and (2) a cross-disciplinary team of faculty evaluates a sample of student work using a common rubric appropriate to the specific general education learning outcomes. Both methods have strengths and weaknesses. The Faculty Assessment Fellows recommended the second method for the pilot based on the following considerations:

- a. It is a manageable approach in that it requires minimal additional work on the part of faculty whose classes are being assessed.
- b. The method is more likely to provide higher inter-rater reliability, since it uses a smaller number of faculty who will be trained on the scoring process and using the rubric.
- c. Results may be more reliable with the use of an external, objective panel of faculty.
- d. Because more than 60% of Core courses are taught by adjuncts/TAs, this method may be more sustainable in the long run. Training large numbers of adjuncts/TAs every year on evaluating general education learning outcomes, using the appropriate rubrics, and submitting results will be challenging.

The methodology the Faculty Assessment Fellows recommended to the Liberal Arts Council is a common practice used by institutions such as Oklahoma State University. In addition, this method has been used effectively for the AAC&U's Multi-State Collaborative (<https://www.aacu.org/value/msc>), and most recently, a federally-funded grant project administered by WICHE on behalf of the Multi-State Passport Initiative (<http://www.wiche.edu/news/wiche-awarded-first-in-the-world-federal-grant-to-expand-interstate-passport>). UNC faculty participated in the WICHE project, and their experiences also helped to shape the recommendation made by the Faculty Assessment Fellows.

## **9. Who are the Faculty Assessment Fellows?**

The UNC Faculty Assessment Fellows work collaboratively on projects that enhance the use of assessment at UNC to improve teaching and learning. The Faculty Assessment Fellows working on the LAC assessment pilot include:

Aaron Haberman, Associate Professor of History, College of Humanities and Social Sciences

Molly Jameson, Assistant Professor of Psychology, College of Education and Behavioral Sciences

Josh Packard, Associate Professor of Sociology, College of Humanities and Social Sciences

## **10. Who can I contact if I have additional questions?**

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