Development of Expected Student Learning Outcomes for General Education

Oregon University System

One of the tasks for the Joint Boards Articulation Committee (JBAC) and the Excellence in Delivery and Productivity Working Group (EDP) of the Oregon University System Board is the development of a process and strategy for devising an outcomes-based general education framework. Senate Bill 342 requires that a report on progress be made to them. Though this seems to be a daunting task, it may not be as overwhelming as it first appears if the work focuses on what is already shared among most, if not all, of the campuses. Much work has been done around the issues of expected student learning on many of our campuses. A useful strategy may be to collate what has already been articulated on the campuses in order to construct a framework within which each campus would devise how students could demonstrate the student learning outcomes satisfactorily.

In the near term, the work done for the Oregon Transfer Module may provide a course shorthand way to measure progress. In the longer term, individual campus conversations and either the Inter-institutional Faculty Senate or a group of faculty and staff representatives from every campus might meet to develop a more robust framework and measures for learning outcomes in general education along the lines successfully employed with the development of the OTM or that form the basis for the Proficiency-based Admission Standards System (PASS). Much good work has already been done through the development of PASS competencies for entry into the OUS system and this could provide further foundation for demonstration of general education outcomes once students are admitted to the university system.

This conversation is timely in that it is taking place in conjunction with national conversations and studies that focus on what students need to learn for success in the workplace, in college, and in civic life. National reports have been appearing in recent years that articulate expected student learning outcomes for general and liberal arts education. We have much information to draw upon that reflects not only academic (faculty), but also business and community conclusions on desirable outcomes for student in this century. [Several such reports are listed in the Bibliography]

Shared Expectations - OUS General Education

In examining the web sites for the seven OUS campuses, two areas of general agreement clearly emerge: 1) a set of abilities or competencies that are essential for success in college and beyond, and 2) broad knowledge categories that reflect traditional understandings of an educated person. The former arena, i.e. capabilities, is uniformly apparent in the campus level statements surrounding general education requirements on the seven campuses. The second arena, i.e. knowledge categories, is most often associated with baccalaureate degree requirements, but sometimes with general education requirements too. {The Appendix includes summaries with abilities words highlighted from each of the campuses except UofO which is sending something].
General Education Commonalities:

By focusing on the general education requirements language found on the various OUS campus web sites, a pattern of abilities and competencies emerge that are strongly associated with student success in the classroom, in the workplace and for life-long learning. These most frequently mentioned abilities are:

- Analyze
- Communicate (orally, written, graphically, symbolically)
- Critique
- Critically and creatively think
- Conduct inquiry and research
- Cross cultural, global understanding
- Exploration and independent learning
- Interpret information
- Problem solving
- Synthesize and application
- Understand, use and investigate knowledge areas effectively

Accomplishing General Education Outcomes:

Based on the OUS campus undergraduate requirements pages, the demonstration of these commonly agreed upon general education learning outcomes would logically be accomplished through the range of courses contained in the various knowledge areas that appear for each campus, generally grouped into either discrete or interdisciplinary categories such as the arts, sciences, social sciences, technology, international, letters, etc. – although there is also variability in these categories in where some content/knowledge areas reside. The one thing that emerges from an examination of the campus web sites is that there is no agreement on the specific content for the knowledge areas. Each campus has a variety of courses in a variety of academic programs that can be included in the knowledge areas. This point has also been reflected in some of the national studies on liberal learning that conclude that universities are likely to better prepare their students for life in the twenty-first century by developing the abilities listed above for general education partly because the storehouse of information and knowledge is currently increasing exponentially and cannot any more be well contained in a single set of courses in a student’s undergraduate career.

The key assumption about undergraduate curriculum already has shifted from a single set of courses required for the educated undergraduate, to a broad set of courses. The important next step would be to devise a process whereby courses are vetted for how the course helps students develop the general education abilities and competencies in those individuals who take the particular course.

As the IFS and JBAC indicated in the OTM process, the goal is to develop a statement of general education learning outcomes that can be satisfied through a variety of courses
offered on the various campuses around the state. The list of outcomes is the goal, not the list of courses. Indeed, some have suggested that it may be possible for students to demonstrate expected outcomes through non-course related activities in some instances.

A process similar to the one used to develop the OTM could probably be used to obtain agreement on the general education learning outcomes presented above since the campuses already have enunciated them. Each campus could then develop methods for students to demonstrate those abilities for their campus. A crosswalk for the campuses could be constructed then so students would know how their work on one campus would transfer to another. Each campus, as with the OTM, would agree to accept the originating campus’ documentation process for student demonstration of the general education abilities.

Concluding Comments:

This examination and condensation of the general education and baccalaureate degree requirements among OUS campuses is a broad brush effort to focus on the commonalities and to construct a starting point where agreement already exists and aligns with national conversations. As with any effort to provide commonality among institutions, there are always many places where disagreement and difference can be found and made to be the focus of discussions. This brief document chose to focus on what is shared while allowing each campus faculty to develop its own approach to demonstrating the articulated general education outcomes. The task laid out in SB 342 is only daunting if we enter the conversation with an emphasis on the differences rather than the substantial commonalities already shared among us.