

Assessment of the General Education Curriculum:  
Second Level Writing Category (367)

*Faculty Focus Group Report*

August, 2008

Meeting Held

May 19, 2008  
9:00 a.m. – 11:00 a.m.  
156 University Hall

General Education Curriculum Second Writing Course  
and  
Faculty /Instructor Participants

African-American & African Studies 367  
Communications 367

Comparative Studies 367

Dance 367

Economics 367

Engineering 367

Human Development & Family Science 367

Linguistics 367

Philosophy 367

Physics 367

Women's Studies 367

Ike Newsum

Susan Kline, Columbus Campus; and  
Brian Sprang, Marion Campus

Marge Lynd

Candace Feck

Bruce Bellner

Clay Housholder

Gene Folden

Julie McGory

Donald Hubin

Harris Kagan

Terry Moore

Facilitator

Judy Ridgway, Center for Life Sciences Education

Observers

Alexis Collier, OAA and Chair, ASC Sub-Committee on Assessment

David Andereck, ASC Sub-Committee on Assessment

Recorder

Kate Hallihan, ASC Curriculum and Assessment Office

## Introduction

The program of General Education (GE) at The Ohio State University (OSU) is delivered through a distributional model in which students take course work in eight categories of study. Each category has distinct expected outcomes that students are expected to achieve through coursework approved for that category. To help evaluate whether students achieve these outcomes, and to use information about student learning for ongoing improvements, the Colleges of the Arts and Sciences (ASC) Assessment Plan for GE calls for assessment at the course, category, and overall program levels.

At the category level, faculty focus groups were planned as an indirect means of assessment to:

- obtain faculty opinions about student learning with respect to the Second Writing Course GEC goals and objectives (see Appendix 1 for listing of goals and objectives)
- gather category-specific information that could be used to improve the curriculum, its delivery, and the achievement of outcomes, and
- facilitate faculty communication about assessment and expected outcomes.

## Procedures

The procedures for the faculty focus group followed those previously established in a pilot focus group designed to assess outcomes in the GEC Natural Science category and are described below. Question topics were refined for the Second Level Writing Skills (course number 367) in consultation with the assessment sub-committee members. The ASC Office of Curriculum and Assessment provided support and resources.

Faculty from across the university and from regional campuses who taught or coordinated multiple sections of 367 courses offered within a department were invited to participate in the focus group. Prior to the meeting participants were provided a copy of the GEC learning goals and objectives for the Second Level Writing Skills category, and student opinion data regarding their learning in the Second Level Writing Category from the ASC graduating senior surveys from Spring 2006 through Spring 2007 (see Appendix 2).

At the meeting, the Chair of the ASC Sub-Committee on Assessment welcomed the participants and introduced the purpose of the meeting. The focus group proper was facilitated by an assessment specialist who had experience conducting focus groups and who had led the pilot group earlier. Neither the Chair of the Sub-Committee nor the Director of the Office of Curriculum and Assessment participated in the formal discussion.

The meeting was then led by the facilitator who used a semi-structured approach for an approximate ninety-minute discussion. The dialogue was framed around five questions shown in Appendix 3. Follow-up questions were asked to elucidate respondent comments. After the group had addressed the questions, the facilitator summarized her observations and asked for clarifications. The participants were thanked for their comments and contributions. Any remaining questions were addressed.

The director of the ASC Office of Curriculum and Assessment summarized the notes, checked their accuracy with the recording, and aligned typical responses with the questions asked. Any apparent outlying responses were noted. She, along with the group facilitator and Chair of the Assessment Sub-Committee, next reviewed the findings, identified themes, considered whether any significant affective responses had been observed, and drew preliminary conclusions. The synthesized summary was then given to the faculty Sub-Committee member who had attended the meeting for independent feedback. The main themes that were found, and representative responses to the questions, are described below.

Faculty were engaged in the focus group process, valued the ideas of other participants, and some were interested in additional follow up support for the development and use of a common Second Level Writing course rubric. The ASC Office of Curriculum and Assessment will convene a discussion group for this purpose in autumn 2008.

### Findings

All attendees participated in the focus group although not all attendees responded to every question. Participants tended to concur in their overall evaluations.

#### *Response Themes*

1. Many felt that students were not prepared in basic writing skills prior to the Second Level Writing course. It was unclear to participants why students were lacking such skills. While the First Level Writing course (English 110) was mentioned, it was also acknowledged that gaps could result from lack of preparation before coming to college.
2. There was an awareness among participants that 367 courses would and did have variation in course content and approaches to addressing communication (both oral and written). Participants were supportive of these differences.
3. All participants endorsed the General Education Curriculum, expressed that they were covering all aspects of the GEC Learning Goals and Objectives in their courses, and generally concurred that the GEC Learning Goals and Objectives did not need revision, even though not all were assessing them. The group agreed that their attention to these Learning Goals and Objectives was increased because of their participation in the focus group.
4. For many courses, oral communication comprised significantly less of the course than written communication.

*Representative Responses to Discussion Question Topics*

Topic	General Response
Approach to GEC Objectives	<p>All objectives are addressed; emphasis on particular objectives may vary by discipline or instructor. Less emphasis on oral expression.</p> <p>All instructors required multiple drafts for written assignments.</p> <p>Instructors emphasized critical thinking and teaching knowledge of disciplinary genres in course content.</p>
Measures of Student Success in Meeting GEC Objectives	<p>Some instructors reported that it was challenging to be explicit about evaluating critical thinking.</p> <p>There was variability in how instructors reported measuring: some used explicit grading rubrics, some used pre- and post-testing, and others were less systematic.</p>
Implications of ASC Exit Survey	<p>Faculty interpreted the survey findings as students not perceiving the value of the GEC because the survey, administered upon graduation, does not allow students enough time to grasp the long term value of a GEC.</p> <p>Incoming student self-perceptions would be valuable in providing a context for the exit survey.</p>
Building on fundamentals learned prior to Second Level Writing course	<p>Most instructors reported the need to review basic writing skills, including basic grammar and syntax.</p> <p>Faculty reported that students did not enter their classes with the skills they expected them to have after having had a course in the fundamentals of expository writing.</p> <p>Second Level Writing course not perceived as an upper-level course. Question as to whether “367” is an appropriate indicator of level of course content.</p>
Suggested Changes to the GEC Objectives	<p>Many reported the need to teach introductory skills indicated above.</p> <p>Most thought the GEC Objectives were correct and had an appropriate level of detail and that the current broad nature of objectives is valuable because content varies widely by discipline.</p>

### *Additional Observations*

- The attention paid to the oral expression component of the Second Level Writing course varied widely among courses. The teaching of oral expression skills, drafting, peer review, systematic grading, length and number of oral assignments tended to be much lower than written assignments with the exception of a few courses.
- There was little spontaneous conversation on the United States focus for the Second Level Writing Course.
- Participants felt that having reduced section size (current limit is 25 students) in Second Level Writing course would allow for more effective teaching and learning.
- Instructors noted large amount of time necessary for grading these courses, which can be particularly stressful for new faculty and graduate student instructors.

### Discussion and Next Steps

- There was a preliminary discussion of the focus group findings at the May 20, 2008, meeting of the ASC CCI Sub-Committee on Assessment.
- The report was discussed and endorsed at the ASC CCI Sub-Committee on Assessment on November 4, 2008.
- The CCI Sub-Committee on Assessment's findings and recommendations will be shared with the full CCI on November 21, 2008.
- The final report will be distributed to focus group invitees, the University Level GEC Advisory Committee (ULAC-GEC), and the ASC CCI.
- A rubric development discussion will take place on November 20, 2008, to be facilitated by Kathleen Hallihan (ASC Curriculum & Assessment Office), Teresa Johnson (Faculty & TA Development) and Christopher Manion (Writing Across the Curriculum).

## Appendix 1

### Second Level Writing Course GEC Learning Goals and Objectives Handout

#### **ASC General Education Program Goals and Objectives**

In the Program of General Education, students will take coursework in several areas of study to achieve basic skills, competencies, and breadth of knowledge expected of an Arts and Sciences college-educated graduate. Learning outcomes to be achieved in this program of study are described below.

#### **Skills**

***Writing and Related Skills*** coursework across disciplines develops students' skills in writing, reading, critical thinking, and oral expression.

- Students apply basic skills in expository writing.
- Students demonstrate critical thinking through written and oral expression.
- Students retrieve and use written information analytically and effectively.

Appendix 2

**ASC Exit Survey Summary Data Spring 2006- Spring 2007  
367 2<sup>nd</sup> Writing Level GEC Category Focus**

<b>Spring 2006- Winter 2007 ASC Exit Survey- Results by College</b>								
Percentages within each box represent the proportion of students answering the top two categories ("great extent", and "to some extent"). Not applicable responses have been removed.								
6 How familiar are you with the educational goals of the General Education Curriculum (GEC)?								
	<b>OVERALL</b>	<b>ART</b>	<b>ASC</b>	<b>BIO</b>	<b>HUM</b>	<b>MPS</b>	<b>SBS</b>	
	51	42	54	50	57	41	52	
<b>Total # of Respondents, #6</b>		<b>831</b>	<b>73</b>	<b>117</b>	<b>149</b>	<b>305</b>	<b>57</b>	<b>754</b>
7 To what extent have writing and related skills GEC courses helped develop my skills in:								
	<b>OVERALL</b>	<b>ART</b>	<b>ASC</b>	<b>BIO</b>	<b>HUM</b>	<b>MPS</b>	<b>SBS</b>	
a Writing?	48	36	57	53	49	30	53	
b Reading?	27	19	33	27	38	12	33	
c Critical Thinking?	43	39	45	39	52	24	49	
d Oral Expression?	29	28	32	29	30	14	39	
<b>Avg # of Respondents, #7(a-d)</b>		<b>793</b>	<b>70</b>	<b>113</b>	<b>141</b>	<b>287</b>	<b>55</b>	<b>721</b>
<b>Spring 2007 ASC Exit Survey- Results by College</b>								
Percentages within each box represent the proportion of students answering the top two categories ("great extent", and "to some extent"). Not applicable responses have been removed.								
11 To what extent have your knowledge, skills, abilities, and personal development improved in the following areas since you began your education at Ohio State?								
	<b>OVERALL</b>	<b>ART</b>	<b>ASC</b>	<b>BIO</b>	<b>HUM</b>	<b>MPS</b>	<b>SBS</b>	
11a Written communication	73	70	76	64	78	57	76	
11b Oral expression	71	73	74	71	70	53	73	
11n Critical thinking	79	75	74	81	79	82	79	
11p Integrating knowledge from different fields	73	72	74	81	70	72	73	
<b>Avg # of Respondents, #11(a-p)</b>		<b>1542</b>	<b>125</b>	<b>97</b>	<b>209</b>	<b>337</b>	<b>95</b>	<b>682</b>

## Appendix 3

### Focus Group Questions

#### Category Level GEC Outcomes Review Focus Group Questions

##### Writing and Related Skills – Second Level (367)

1. In your 367 GEC courses, how do you approach the learning objectives listed on your handout? (perhaps probe as to write/rewrite opportunities; feedback)
2. How do you know students are learning what is intended with respect to the writing second level goals and expected outcomes for both writing and oral expression? (gets at assessment)
3. What do the results of the ASC Exit Survey suggest? (Let participants review the data regarding the specific questions chosen on the survey)
4. The second level writing course assumes reinforcement of skills as students progress through their general education program.
  - a. How do you build on fundamentals of expository writing set forth in the first course in writing?

(may probe with writing dimensions expected in first level, i.e., to produce writing characterized by: a clear sense of purpose; effectively ordered and fully supported ideas; style appropriate to purpose and audience; and control of grammatical and mechanical elements)?

5. If you think the learning objectives should be changed, what changes do you suggest?