

May 26, 2023

To: Sang-Hee Lee, Chair of the Riverside Division

From: UCR Assessment Advisory Committee members:

Ken Baerenklau, Associate Provost and Professor of Public Policy (Co-Chair)
Omar Safie, Director of Evaluation & Assessment (Co-Chair)
*Subramanian Balachander, Albert O. Steffey Chair and Professor of Marketing
Richard Edwards, Executive Director of XCITE
Hayden Harris, Director of Student Affairs Assessment & Research
Pablo Joo, Senior Associate Dean for Medical Education, Associate Dean for Clinical Medical Education, and Professor of Family Medicine
*Eamonn Keogh, Distinguished Professor of Computer Science & Engineering
Thomas Kramer, Associate Dean for Undergraduate Business Programs and Professor of Marketing
Covadonga Lamar-Prieto, Associate Dean for CHASS Student Academic Affairs and Associate Professor of Hispanic Studies
Greg Richey, Assistant Professor of Teaching in Finance and Meta Assessment Committee Member
Louie Rodriguez, Vice Provost and Dean for Undergraduate Education and Professor of Education
Susana Salazar, Budget Director for Financial Planning & Analysis
Kate Sweeny, Associate Dean for Graduate Academic Affairs and Professor of Psychology
*John Wills, Associate Professor of Education
*Bryan Wong, Professor of Chemical & Environmental Engineering
** denotes Senate-appointed members*

Re: Proposal to Improve Assessment of Core Competencies and General Education at UCR

Dear Sang-Hee,

The Assessment Advisory Committee would like to propose a way forward for General Education at UCR, and requests that the Academic Senate consider:

- 1) adopting program learning outcomes for general education, and**
- 2) charging a standing committee of faculty with responsibility for managing this important but often overlooked part of our curriculum.**

Below, we describe the background, rationale, and significance of this proposal.

I. BACKGROUND: WSCUC-MANDATED CORE COMPETENCIES

As you know, the campus has utilized a joint Senate-administrative committee called the Assessment Advisory Committee for oversight of campus assessment and accreditation activities for about 15 years. The charge for this committee states:

The Assessment Advisory Committee (AAC) is established by the Provost and Executive Vice Chancellor and provides oversight for the assessment of program learning outcomes, core competencies,¹ and performance in non-academic units. The AAC reviews annual assessment summary reports, identifies patterns of concern, recommends program and process changes, and ensures assessment is continuously improving. The AAC also reviews reports from regional and disciplinary accrediting bodies to ensure that the campus assessment activities are appropriately aligned with strategic plans and institutional goals. The AAC works with the Meta-Assessment Committee to ensure programs receive guidance on assessment best practices, and submits an annual report to the Provost that summarizes campus assessment activities and sets goals for improvement.

At its spring 2023 meeting, the AAC reviewed the latest campus-wide core competency assessment report and discussed the draft recommendations. As has been the case with prior core competency assessment reports, the recommendations again address challenges and shortcomings related to how the campus integrates training in the core competencies into the undergraduate curriculum, and assesses student achievement of desired outcomes in the core competencies.

We continue to face these challenges because we have not been sufficiently purposeful about integrating the core competencies into the curriculum, we have not created our own evaluation rubrics, and we have not set specific performance benchmarks.

This can be viewed as problematic through different lenses. The lens that the AAC is using is shared by our regional accreditor, WSCUC, which requires assessment of core competencies as a criterion for accreditation. Although we are conducting these assessments, our accreditor also rightly expects that we have been purposeful about our plan to help students achieve desired levels of success in the core competencies, and that our assessment methods have been designed not only to determine the extent to which students are achieving outcomes but also to inform how our plan needs to change if outcomes are not being met. Our current approach falls short of these expectations.

In our view, the fundamental problem is that the core competencies have not been adopted as formal learning outcomes for all undergraduates. When groups of faculty who are responsible for parts of the curriculum choose to adopt specific learning outcomes, such as program outcomes for our undergraduate majors, they are thoughtful about what successful achievement of desired outcomes looks like, how the curriculum will support successful achievement, and how they will assess achievement to inform curricular changes and improvements where needed. This process is happening in our majors because clear responsibility for the major produces the necessary alignment of curriculum and assessment. We are now seeing curricular changes in our majors that were derived from assessment results, but there is currently little chance of this happening for any of the core competencies at the campus level.

¹ Our regional accreditor, the WASC Senior College and University Commission (WSCUC), currently requires assessment of undergraduate student achievement in five core competencies: written communication, oral communication, quantitative reasoning, critical thinking, and information literacy. Upcoming changes to the WSCUC accreditation standards will still require development of core competencies in students but will not specify what they should be.

II. BACKGROUND: GENERAL EDUCATION AT UCR

At the same time, we have a related problem with our current approach to general education. Although the campus has an aspirational statement titled “Goals of an Undergraduate Education” that expresses what we hope to achieve through general education, we do not undertake systematic assessments of general education courses to understand if we are being successful. This statement has appeared in the General Catalog for perhaps 30 years:

The faculty of UCR hereby declare the following set of general educational goals to be pursued through our individual and collective efforts in teaching and guiding the undergraduates of this campus.

A university education must help students realize their potential as individuals and contributing participants in society. This involves the acquisition of knowledge and skills, as well as preparation for future responsibilities.

A general education provides a framework that enables one to appreciate and critically examine the significant aspects of civilization. This framework is derived from the study of world history; political and economic systems; the ethnic, cultural, and religious diversity of the peoples of the Earth; the arts and letters of all cultures; the social and natural sciences; and technology. Such a broad education is the foundation for concentrated studies that enable students to prepare for careers and to strive for an understanding of the world in which they live and about which they must make decisions.

A university education nurtures the critical skills of oral and written communication, including the exercise of these skills in a language other than one’s own. It must teach students to become verbally and quantitatively literate, to analyze and synthesize, and to regard the acquisition of knowledge as a lifetime activity. A university education must promote tolerance of the opinions of others and an understanding of the mutual dependence of human beings on each other and on their natural environment. The student’s university years also provide an opportunity to develop integrity, self-esteem, self-discipline, style, humanness, commitment to the general welfare, sensitivity to the interplay of environment and technology, and confidence that the human drama is worthy of a lengthy future.

There is significant overlap between this statement and the current WSCUC core competencies. There is also reasonable alignment with our university and college breadth requirements. But the mapping is not entirely clear or complete, and the “goals” are more philosophical than specific and measurable:

Excerpts from “Goals of an Undergraduate Education”	Current WSCUC core competencies	UCR’s university and common college breadth requirements
<i>Appreciate and critically examine the significant aspects of civilization</i>	Critical thinking	American history; Humanities
<i>Analyze and synthesize</i>		Social sciences; Humanities
<i>Written communication</i>	Written communication	Entry-level writing; English composition
<i>Quantitatively literate</i>	Quantitative reasoning	Natural sciences and mathematics
<i>Oral communication; Verbally literate</i>	Oral communication	
<i>Regard the acquisition of knowledge as a lifetime activity</i>	Information literacy	

<i>Tolerance of the opinions of others</i>		Humanities; Ethnicity
<i>Understand the mutual dependence of human beings on each other and the natural environment</i>		Natural sciences and mathematics
<i>Develop integrity, self-esteem, self-discipline, style, humanness, commitment to the general welfare, sensitivity to the interplay of environment and technology, and confidence that the human drama is worthy of a lengthy future</i>		

It is important to note that WSCUC has been requesting improvements in our assessment of general education for at least 13 years. During the 2010 reaccreditation visit, the external team wrote: “the team recommends that a plan and timeline be developed for the assessment of General Education.” During the interim visit in 2015, efforts to improve appeared to be on track. But during the 2018 reaccreditation visit, the external team wrote:

“There were some Criteria for Review that do not appear to have been met ... educational objectives for the General Education Program were not found.”

“It is critical that each program – degree programs and GE, at the undergraduate and graduate levels – have clearly defined student learning outcomes, stated in measurable terms, mapped to the curriculum, and aligned with the mission to ensure the integrity of those degrees.”

“The Team was unable to find breadth/GE Program Student Learning Outcomes (PSLOs) to determine the role that general education plays in a UCR degree. It is critical that faculty determine the PSLOs for general education and align the curriculum such that students will attain those learning goals.”

“We positively note that UCR is beginning to establish a procedure for the review of general education, which is timely. To bring the campus in alignment with WSCUC requirements, this effort should ensure the campus has a sustainable plan for identifying General Education learning outcomes, aligning these outcomes with the university mission, and measuring achievement of the outcomes annually. Assessment of core competencies must, necessarily, also be a part of this effort. Given the assignment of responsibility for curricular review at UCR to the Academic Senate, that body must be diligent in setting expectations for application of best practices in assessment for all the degree-bearing programs under its purview.”

During the special visit in 2022, the external team commented that we again appeared to be back on track, but they also noted the following:

“Section 3.1.7 of the Institution SV Report (pages 16-17) indicates that a draft proposal integrating the core competencies into a new general education structure was proposed to the Academic Senate by the Academic Senate’s General Education Review Committee. *[continues]* Although the Academic Senate has not yet discussed and approved the proposal, these efforts demonstrate the commitment to the ongoing review of General Education curriculum and core competencies. The progress on this proposal should be addressed during the next review.”

The external team also concluded that “progress on this proposal has stalled.”

III. RATIONALE AND SIGNIFICANCE

The AAC will begin writing the report for our next reaccreditation visit in less than two years. Absent any changes, we will have to report that we continue to be unable to make progress on the very reasonable requests of the previous external review teams, and the expectations of our accreditor.

However, the AAC believes that the campus is poised to address both our core competency and our general education assessment challenges. As has been proposed in the 2021 Senate ad hoc committee report *R'Horizons: Proposal for a New UCR General Education Curriculum*, **the AAC proposes that the Academic Senate formally adopt program learning outcomes for general education and charge a standing committee of faculty with responsibility for managing this important but often overlooked part of our curriculum.** The AAC is agnostic about what these learning outcomes should be, although we see strong logic in using the current WSCUC core competencies along with definitions that are tailored to the academic experience that our faculty want our undergraduate students to have. This is essentially what was proposed in the *R'Horizons* report.

This proposal would effectively treat general education as an academic program: faculty would develop desired program-level learning outcomes and would be responsible (with support from the Office of Evaluation and Assessment) for evaluating student achievement of these outcomes and making recommendations for curricular improvement. This would bring general education into better alignment with how we manage our undergraduate and graduate degree programs, all of which now have established program learning outcomes that are reviewed on a regular cycle. Administratively, it would make general education most similar to an interdepartmental major for which a “committee in charge” has responsibility for curricular oversight, including assessment and improvement.

The AAC is not advocating for all of the changes proposed in *R'Horizons*. We are advocating for a relatively small but critical step which is the adoption of general education learning outcomes. We also want to emphasize that it is not necessary to first answer all of the questions that will follow from this step, such as who will be appointed to the committee, how will they assess outcomes, what kinds of curricular changes might occur, etc. All of this is part of the regular, ongoing work of managing any curriculum. It is already happening in our majors. Importantly, our accreditor expects this work to be a continual process. We are not expected to have all of these questions answered nor changes made in the next two years. But the AAC believes that we can and should have clarity about what we are trying to accomplish through general education, as well as who is responsible for coordinating our efforts to achieve those goals. Therefore, we ask the Senate to take up this matter in a timely fashion so that we may make progress on updating our general education program, formalize the integration of core competencies into our curriculum (per WSCUC) in advance of our next re-accreditation review, and – most importantly – provide our students with a strong foundation on which they can build expertise in their chosen majors.