

General Education Assessment: Best Practices

HLC Criterion 4b:

The institution engages in **ongoing assessment** of student learning as part of its commitment to the educational outcomes of its students.

1. The institution has effective processes for **assessment of student learning** and for **achievement of learning goals** in academic and cocurricular offerings.
2. The institution **uses** the information gained from assessment to **improve** student learning.
3. The institution's processes and methodologies to assess student learning reflect **good practice**, including the substantial participation of faculty, instructional and other relevant staff members.

For more information, visit the [HLC webpage](#).

GER Assessment

Ongoing assessment of both general education requirements and of all UWM degree programs is mandated by HLC Criterion 4b and by the UWM Academic Program and Policy Committee. Ongoing assessment means that some assessment data should be collected each year. Assessment related to general education is an area of special interest to HLC reviewers. Faculty and other instructors teaching courses with general education credit determine how to assess the GER component of their courses, however the methods used should correspond with good assessment practice.

Accountability vs. Improvement:

Most assessment practices adopted by UWM faculty satisfy part 1 above, but sometimes struggle to satisfy parts 2 and 3 if they are rooted in an *accountability* mindset. Saying that 80% of your students met minimum requirements may seem to serve a compliance function, but such data is often not useful to faculty.

HLC reviewers emphasize documentation of how faculty **use and respond** to assessment data (4b.2) which is part of the idea of **“good practice”** (4b.3). This is part of a long-standing shift from an “accountability” mindset to one focused around *improvement* (e.g., Litterst & Thompkins, 2000; Banta, 2002; Ewell, 2009; and others). As such, the simplest explanation of “good practice” is that it is focused on **collecting assessment data that is *actually* useful for helping faculty improve student learning**. Data that helps teachers spot potential areas of improvement generally always *also* fulfills the “accountability” function of assessment.

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Characteristics of Good Practice:

Alignment

The GER outcome is usually assessed in relation to the course learning outcome(s) [CLOs] most logically associated with it. The APCC requires GER syllabi to make explicit how course learning outcomes align with GER outcomes, and how students will be assessed on those outcomes.

Direct Measures

Direct measures (required): At least **one measure must result directly from faculty evaluation of student performance or work**. Examples: An assignment grade, a score from exam questions related to the outcome, rubric scores, written faculty observations of student performance (when done and analyzed systematically). While a direct measure is required, “data” doesn’t *only* mean numbers.

Indirect measures (optional): Student self-evaluations, reflections, survey responses, course evaluations (where questions related to learning are asked), focus groups, interviews. These are optional, in addition to a direct measure, however they are often incredibly helpful for contextualizing and interpreting other assessment data.

Validity

Data collected should be **narrowly** tailored to measure or document proficiency, mastery, or achievement on a **specific outcome** (i.e., the measure should *not* collapse several outcomes together or include other factors, such as attendance or participation; this is also **why GPA or final course grades are not useful as assessment data**).

Usefulness

The measure(s) used should allow for **patterns of strength or weakness** to be observed. That is usually best accomplished with attention to:

- How many students are not meeting expectations for the outcome
- How many students are meeting only *minimum* expectations for the outcome
- How many students are fully meeting expectations for the outcome
- How many students are exceeding expectations for the outcome, given the course level

HLC reviewers look for how faculty have *used* assessment to identify areas in which students may be struggling more than others, and *what kinds of interventions, course changes, assignment redesigns, or pedagogical innovations resulted from that*. Data should be collected and reported in a format that reflects its utility.

Meaningfulness

The outcome measured, and the method of observation or measurement, should allow faculty and instructional staff to dig into and investigate learning issues in their courses that they care about. Such data can be **more useful when collected as part of a process of course redesign** (to compare results from one version of the course to the

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next), to **determine how well past changes have worked**, or to **plan future changes** to the course or to specific assignments. Expectations, including benchmarks (minimally acceptable scores/performance) and targets (the percent of students expected to hit each benchmark) should be set by the instructor (or by the department or program).

Examples of GER Assessment “Data”

CLO= Course Learning Outcome

Bad or Questionable Data:	100% of 32 students earned a grade of B or better in FLR 100. Target: 80% earn a B or better. <u>Target Met.</u>
	100% of students gave a presentation.
	90% of students earned a grade of C or better on the final exam.
<i>Reason: The first measure, a course grade, collapses multiple outcomes and other performance factors together, and so provides no actionable information about specific strengths and weaknesses. The second measure does not show relative student performance, and it's not clear how giving a presentation measures a learning outcome. The third measure likely combines multiple course outcomes tested on the exam, and while 90% may have earned a C or better, it's not clear how many students earned As or Bs, or if their overall performance actually matched the instructor's expectations. None of these clearly shows student learning for a specific GER outcome.</i>	
Minimally acceptable, but not good practice	95% (60/63) of students earned the minimum benchmark score of 2 on the rubric for CLO2, which aligns with ARTS GER outcome (b), assessed through a “found art” sculpture project. (Scale 1-3). Target: 90% of students will meet the minimum benchmark. <u>Target Met.</u>
<i>Reason: By focusing only on minimal competency, or pass/fail, this data doesn't facilitate course or program improvement; this is a classic example of data rooted only in the accountability mindset.</i>	
Good Practice:	91% (43/47) of students taking the final exam passed with a grade of C or better. Part II of the exam specifically measured student knowledge and skills related to Soc Sci GER outcome (e). 79% (37/47) of students earned at least 35/50 possible points in Part II, while 40% (19/47) earned 45/50 possible points or higher. Target(s): 80% will earn at least 35/50 points in Part II, and at least 25% will earn 45/50 or higher. <u>Targets Met/Exceeded.</u> Action Plan: The exam results show that course content related to SS GER outcome (e) are working well. No changes planned.
<i>Reason: The assessment data is pulled from a section of the exam specifically aligned with the GER outcome to be measured. The reported data includes attention to how many students are earning high scores as well as minimum scores, making it easier to spot patterns of strong or poor performance (in this case, strong performance).</i>	
Good Practice:	90% (81/90) of students met the benchmark score of 2 on the rubric for CLO3, which aligns with NS GER outcome (b) as is measured by assessing lab journals. 60% (54/90) scored 3 or higher, and 40% (36/90) earned a score of 4 or 5. Targets: 90% will score 2 or higher, with 75% scoring 3 or higher. <u>Targets Partially Met.</u> Action Plan: I plan to spend more time on course content related to CLO3,

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	<p>adding a new exercise to give students practical, hands-on experience. We also plan to add training for our TAs to help them better support students in achieving this outcome.</p>
<p><i>Reason: This detailed data more readily informs course or program improvement. While almost everyone is meeting minimum requirements, the instructor would like to see a larger share of students performing at a higher level, and plans to make changes.</i></p>	
<p>Good Practice:</p>	<p>Direct measure: 87% (52/60) of students in FLR150 achieved a grade of B or better on the final paper, which asked students to engage in a textual and aesthetic analysis of a folktale related to GER outcome HUM(b). <u>Target Met.</u></p> <p>Indirect measure: 98% (59/60) students reported, on a question specific to outcome HUM(b) included in the course evaluation, that they felt the course improved their ability to analyze and understand the textual and aesthetic aspects various forms of American folklore. Several students noted that they would like to see more recent examples of urban legends incorporated into the course. <u>Target Met.</u></p> <p>Action Plan: The instructor is updating their syllabus with more recent readings, however the final paper assignment will remain the same.</p>
<p><i>Reason: The direct measure is not a course grade, but rather a grade from an assignment specifically designed to help students fulfill GER outcome HUM(b). The grade, presumably, correlates strongly with student proficiency (however, if the grade relies too much on other factors, such as effort, then it may also be a bad measure). It is paired with an indirect measure, also targeted at the GER outcome, asking students to evaluate their own learning and provide feedback to improve the course.</i></p>	
<p>Best Practice:</p>	<p>Year 1: 90% (81/90) of students met the benchmark score of 2 on the rubric for CLO7, which aligns with HUM GER outcome (c), assessed through a student presentation of their course research project. 60% (54/90) scored 3 or higher, and 40% (36/90) earned a score of 4 or 5. Targets: 90% will score 2 or higher, with 75% scoring 3 or higher. <u>Targets Partially Met.</u> Action Plan: Nearly 1/3 of students performed at or near the minimum acceptable score. Next year, I plan to spend more time on course content related to this outcome, adding a new exercise to give students practical, hands-on experience applying course theories to real life examples.</p> <p>Year 2: 95% (87/92) of students met the benchmark score of 2 on the rubric for CLO7. 70% (64/92) scored 3 or higher, and 41% (38/92) earned a score of 4 or 5. Targets: 90% will score 2 or higher, with 75% scoring 3 or higher. <u>Targets Partially Met.</u> Action Plan Follow-Up: Student performance has improved for this outcome, although not yet as much as I'd hoped. After a consultation with CETL, I will try a peer review process to help students improve their project before being graded on it.</p>
<p><i>Reason: This data shows ongoing and sustained attention to improving student learning, and also to investigating and following up on how well interventions have worked.</i></p>	