

General Education Assessment Results: Social and Behavioral Sciences

George Mason University

I. Assessment Overview

The assessment of the general education Social and Behavioral Sciences (SBS) category was conducted in the 2009-10 academic year. Courses were selected for assessment in late summer 2009 and faculty information sessions were held at the beginning of the fall semester. Compared with the other general education categories, a significant proportion of SBS courses have large enrollment (> 200 students) in lecture sessions. The six largest SBS lecture sessions, taught by senior faculty, enrolled more than 1,600 students. Another nine SBS lecture sessions had course enrollment between 150-200 students. For courses with multiple sections, faculty members who taught large lecture sessions were more likely to be selected for assessment than their colleagues who taught fewer students.

The following is a brief summary about the assessment scope:

1. Total number of SBS courses offered in fall 2009: **22 courses** (61 sections) by **49 faculty members** in the following fields: administration of justice, African American Studies, anthropology, conflict analysis, economics, education, geography, public and international affairs, history, linguistics, psychology, sociology, women's studies, and recreation, health and tourism.
2. Total students enrolled: **4,438** (875 students took more than one SBS course)
3. Student survey respondents: **838** (19%)
4. Total number of courses/sections selected for assessment: **14** (*Note: course sections with large enrollments were more likely to be selected for assessment than those with small enrollments*)
5. Total portfolios collected: from **10** faculty members who taught approximately 1,400 students
6. Total reviewers: **5** faculty members (each portfolio received at least 2 ratings)
7. Total student work samples reviewed: **80**

The portfolio reviewers were tenured faculty members in SBS fields and members of the University General Education Committee. All reviewers went through a training in which they had in-depth discussions about the criteria using one portfolio as an example. Then the reviewers broke into teams of two and worked on their assigned portfolios. If a course was rated differently on its overall effectiveness in addressing the intended SBS learning outcomes by the two reviewers, a third reviewer was used. Five SBS portfolios were reviewed by a third reviewer.

Note: The results presented in Sections II – V were based on the ratings from the first two reviewers. Section VI presents a comparison of the courses rated by two reviewers and those rated by three reviewers.

II. Learning Outcomes

Upon completing a general education social and behavioral sciences course, students will be able to:

1. Demonstrate understanding of key concepts, terminology, principles or theories within the field.
2. Demonstrate understanding of methodological approaches appropriate to the field.

3. Identify, evaluate and properly cite resources appropriate to the field, such as audio/visual/online/print materials, or artifacts.
4. Explain how individuals, groups or institutions are influenced by contextual factors as appropriate to the field.
5. Use appropriate method(s) to apply social and behavioral science concepts, terminology, principles, or theories to significant issues.

A general education SBS course is required to address at least three of the above learning outcomes. The ten portfolios collected represented ten different courses offered by eight departments. Seven courses were at the 100-level and three were at the 200-level. The four largest courses had an enrollment of more than 170 students for each and the smallest course had an enrollment of 20. The reviewers were able to identify at least three SBS learning outcomes for every course reviewed. As shown in Table 1, Outcomes, 1, 4 and 5 were addressed by almost all courses.

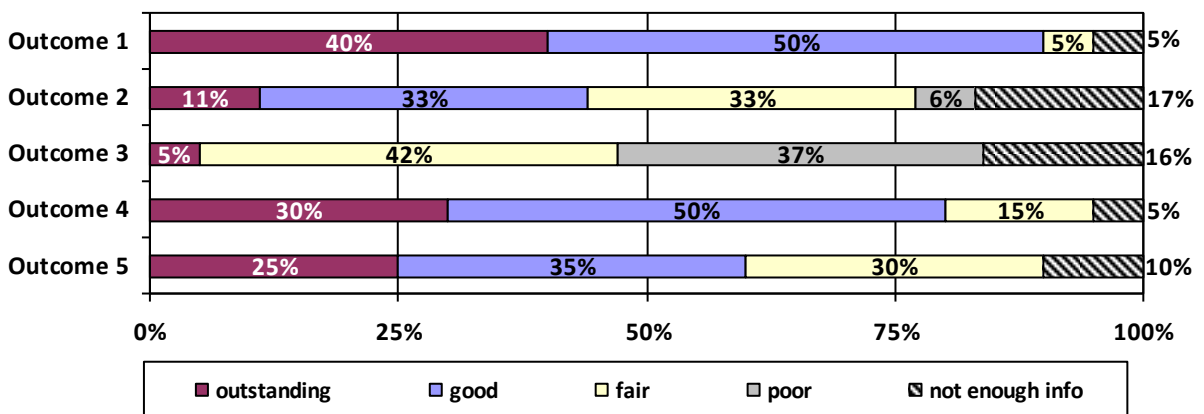
Table 1. Which gen ed learning outcomes does the faculty member intend to address in the course/section?

	Identified		Not Identified	
	Count*	Row N %	Count	Row N %
Outcome 1	19	95%	1	5%
Outcome 2	15	75%	5	25%
Outcome 3	17	85%	3	15%
Outcome 4	19	95%	1	5%
Outcome 5	19	95%	1	5%

* Count indicates the count of ratings, not the count of portfolios. Each portfolio was rated twice.

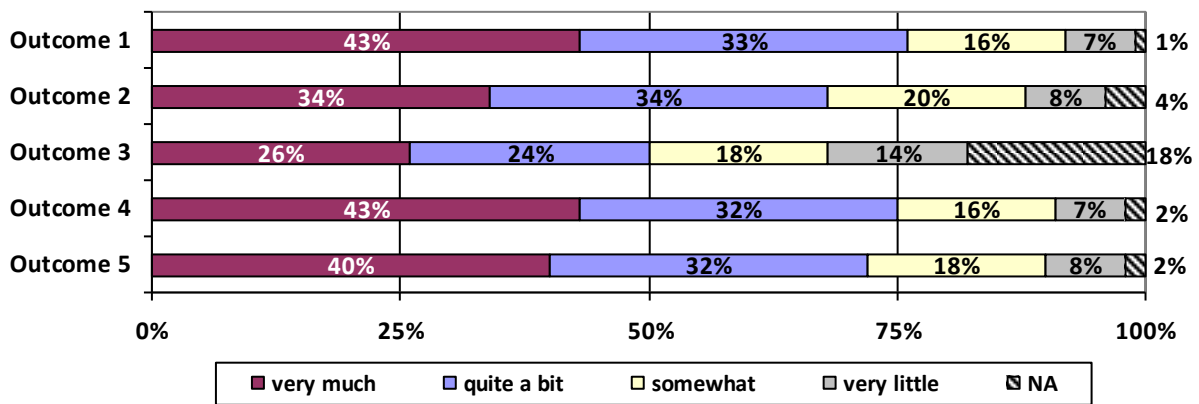
The reviewers found that Outcomes 1 and 4 were addressed most successfully: 90% of the ratings for Outcome 1 fell into either the “outstanding” or “good” category; 80% of the ratings for Outcome 4 fell into the same categories. Outcome 3, “identifying, evaluating and properly citing resources appropriate to the field,” was rated the lowest: “fair” ratings accounting for 42% and “poor” ratings accounting for 37%. Outcome 2, “understanding methodological approaches appropriate to the field,” was also rated relatively low. Several participating faculty members said that they did not address this outcome in depth in their 100-level SBS courses.

Figure 1. How well are the intended learning outcomes addressed in the course?



At the end of the spring 2010 semester, a student learning outcomes survey was conducted among all students who were enrolled in an SBS course. They were asked to rate the course’s contribution to their knowledge and skills in the same five learning outcomes. Their responses were overwhelmingly positive (see Figure 2). For Outcomes 1, 2, 4, and 5, between 34-43% of the respondents selected “very much” and 32-34% selected “quite a bit.” Eighteen percent of the respondents said their courses did not address Outcome 3 and another 14% felt their courses contributed “very little” to Outcome 3.

Figure 2. Student Perception: To what extent has this course contributed to your knowledge and skills in the following areas? Please note that some of these goals may NOT be addressed in your course. In those cases, please check "not applicable."*



* Note: the survey was conducted among all students who were enrolled in a general education SBS course, many of whom were taught by faculty members who did NOT participate in the portfolio assessment. As noted above, the low response rate to this survey means that these results are presented on an informational/advisory basis only, not as a formal assessment finding.

III. Student Work Samples

The Office of Institutional Assessment did a random sampling of students in each assessed course/section. In courses with less than 100 students enrolled, 10% of the students were randomly selected; in courses with more than 100 students, 5-10% of the students were selected. Faculty members were asked to identify an assignment and submit one work sample from each randomly selected student and, if they preferred, an additional sample from a self-selected student. A total of 80 student work samples were submitted: 77 randomly selected and 3 faculty selected. The work samples came in a variety of forms – research papers, short essays, final exams, etc. Given the class size, some faculty members use quizzes and multiple-choice exams as the primary assessment method of student learning. In those cases, faculty members were asked to identify and map selected exam items to the general education SBS learning outcomes.

Reviewers found that the assignments, from which the work samples came, were most likely to address Outcomes 1 and 4: demonstrating understanding of key concepts, terminology, principles or theories within the field and explaining how individuals, groups or institutions are influenced by contextual factors as appropriate to the field (see Table 2). Only one third of the assignments addressed Outcome 3: identifying, evaluating and properly citing resources appropriate to the field. As shown in Figure 3, most of the assignments gave students the opportunity

to demonstrate their competence in the intended outcomes: “very much” accounting for 20% of the ratings and “quite a bit” 45%.

The reviewers read through students’ papers and essays to evaluate whether the samples manifested the intended outcomes but they did not re-grade the exams. One third of the reviewed work samples either “completely” or “mostly” demonstrated the intended outcomes, another one third “somewhat adequately.” Reviewers’ ratings, although answering a different set of questions, demonstrated consistency with the instructors’ judgment about the student work samples: one third were rated “highly competent” by the instructor, and another one third were rated “competent” (see Table 3).

Table 2. Intended Outcome(s) addressed in the selected assignment

	Addressed in the Assignment	
	Count	Row N %
Outcome 1	17	85%
Outcome 2	10	50%
Outcome 3	7	35%
Outcome 4	19	95%
Outcome 5	15	75%

Figure 3. To what extent does the assignment give students the opportunity to demonstrate their competence in the intended outcome(s)?

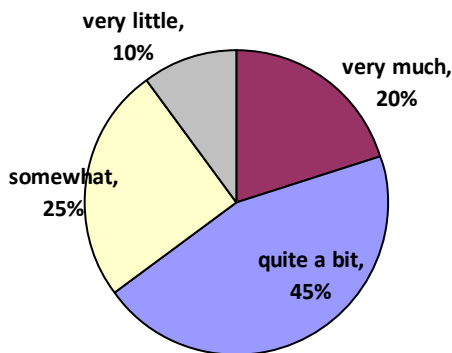


Figure 4. How fully do the student work samples manifest the intended outcomes?

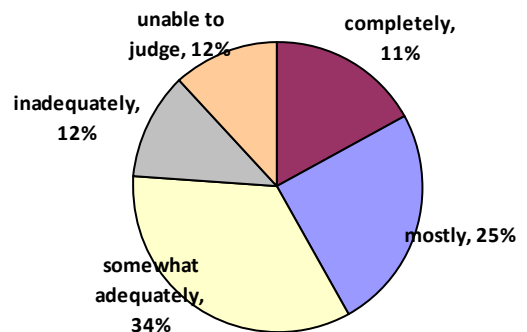


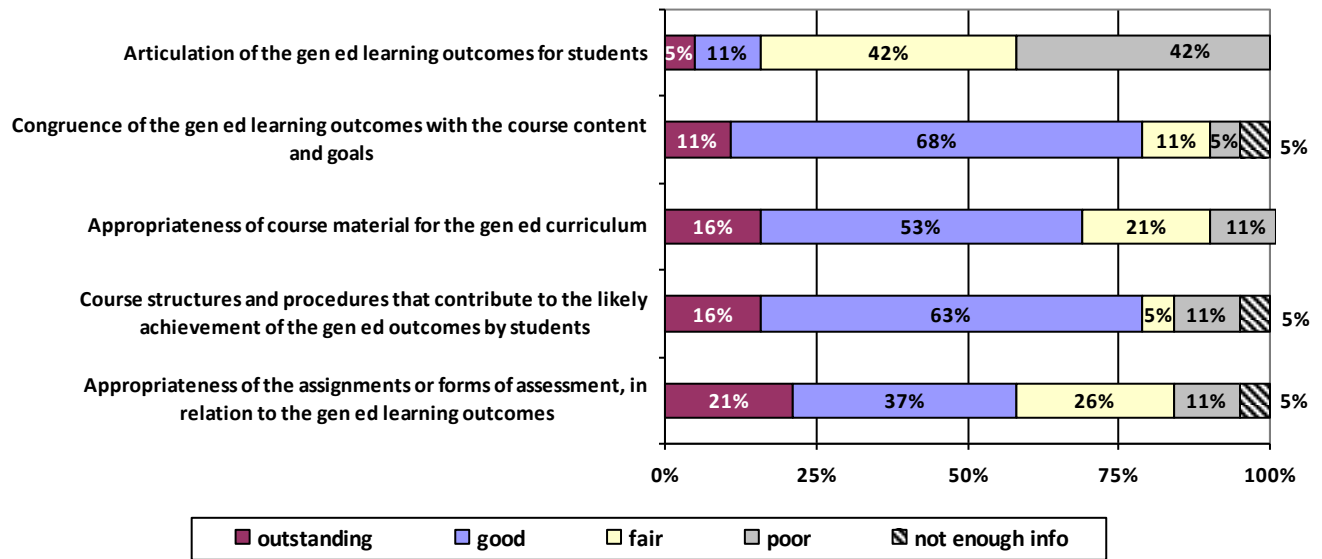
Table 3. Instructors’ Assessment of Student Competence Reflected in the Work Samples

		Highly competent	Competent	Marginal	Less than competent
Student Work	Count	27	30	12	11
	Row N %	34%	37%	15%	14%

IV. Overall Ratings

Of five general questions, a majority of the courses were rated either “outstanding” or “good” for four items. On course structures and procedures and congruence of the course outcomes with the general education outcomes, nearly 80% of the ratings were in the “outstanding” and “good” categories. Articulation of the general education learning outcomes for students was rated relatively lower than the other four items: “outstanding” and “good” ratings accounting for 16%.

Figure 5. Given the mission of the General Education program, please rate the course in the following categories:



On the overall effectiveness of the course in addressing the intended SBS learning outcomes, “outstanding” ratings accounted for 11% and “good” ratings accounted for 56%. Over 70% of the students, as reported from the survey, said the courses increased their understanding of social and behavioral sciences “very much” or “quite a bit.”

Figure 6. Reviewers: Overall, how well does the course address the intended gen ed learning outcomes for the category?

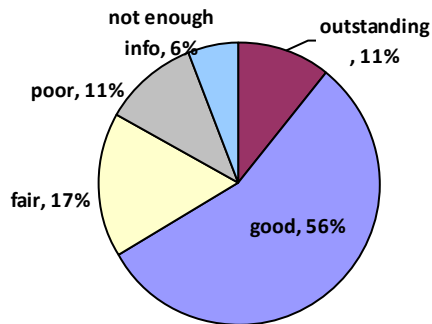
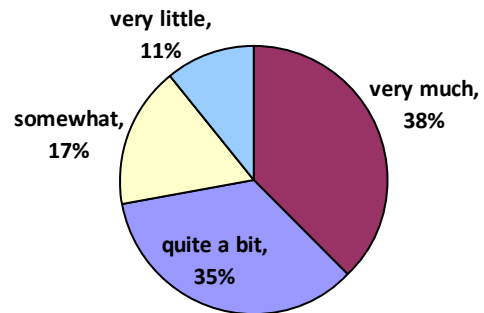


Figure 7. Student Perception: To what extent has this course increased your understanding of social & behavioral sciences?



V. Examples of Reviewers' Comments

The reviewers were given an opportunity to comment on features of the course and provide recommendations. The following presents selected verbatim comments:

1. *What elements/features from the course would you recommend to other faculty members who also teach general education courses in the social and behavioral sciences?*

- Attempts to use small groups, whether in person or online, to facilitate discussion and debate are a great strategy to develop critical thinking skills. Supplemental readings relevant to current events (e.g., Bush Inaugural Address in 2001) ensure a high likelihood of meaningful engagement.
- Everything in this class is taught in context and thus, the concepts, theories, and methodologies are more likely to remain with students far beyond the completion of the course.
- The case studies seem to be an interesting approach to address learning outcome #4--Explain how individuals, groups or institutions are influenced by contextual factors as appropriate to the field.
- The level of ongoing feedback to students completing papers was simply extraordinary. Excellent detail on what was required for written assignments. Excellent detail on meaningful outcomes that students are expected to gain from course. I appreciate how students have autonomy to choose topics of personal value and meaning for writing assignments. I also appreciate the fact that students are reading scientific articles to supplement the textbook.
- The multiple assignments are designed to allow students autonomy in meeting their educational objectives. Also, the importance of the course material to everyday life is embedded throughout classes and assignments.
- The use of short-answer and essay options to gain extra credit on multiple choice exams is a useful strategy in large classes to increase the likelihood students can showcase knowledge.

2. *In terms of addressing the intended gen ed learning outcomes, what suggestions would you give to the faculty member?*

- It would be nice if the faculty member could include the general education learning outcomes on the syllabus (at least those that are addressed in the course). Students often don't know that a particular course counts toward their general education unless stated on the syllabus.
- I would recommend some readings to supplement the major textbooks to increase interest and engagement in the material. The syllabus could benefit from additional information on the objectives of gen ed learning. This includes links to course material and attention to the bigger picture in the objectives stated in the syllabus
- The only suggestion I have is that the instructor provide additional information about how the learning outcomes are relevant to students. This means providing more than just a list and perhaps clarifying to students what the primary aim of the assignments are in terms of meeting objectives

VI. Third Reviews

After the review session, it was noted that for five portfolios, the two reviewers assigned a different rating for the question: "Overall, how well does the course address the intended general education learning outcomes for social and behavioral sciences?" A third reviewer was brought in to re-assess these portfolios. Table 4 illustrates the

mean scores for the five courses that needed an extra review (Note: the mean scores were calculated on a 4-point scale, 4= outstanding, 3=good, 2=fair and 1=poor). For comparison, the mean scores for the courses that did not need an extra review are also included.

The five courses that needed a third review had significantly *lower* ratings than the other five courses on the following items: appropriateness of the course material for the general education curriculum, course structures and procedures that contribute to the likely achievement of the general education outcomes by students, and the overall rating of the course in addressing the intended general education learning outcomes for the category. The third reviews generally improved the mean scores of these five courses. On articulation of the general education learning outcomes for students, the courses that were reviewed three times were rated significantly higher than those rated twice. It should be noted that the quality of a course portfolio (e.g., its clarity, comprehensiveness, faculty’s reflection on teaching and learning, etc.) has a significant impact on reviewers’ judgment of the above areas. A sketchy faculty reflection often led to reviewers’ difficulty in understanding the context of the course as well as its goals and processes.

Table 4. Comparison of Mean Ratings for Courses that Received an Additional Review

	No Extra Review Needed (5 courses)		Extra Review Needed (5 courses)	
	Two Reviewers		Two Reviewers	Three Reviewers
	<i>Mean*</i>		<i>Mean</i>	<i>Mean</i>
Articulation of the gen ed learning outcomes for students	1.80		2.00	2.07
Congruence of the gen ed learning outcomes with the course content and goals	2.90		2.89	3.00
Appropriateness of course material for the gen ed curriculum	3.10		2.40	2.67
Course structures and procedures that contribute to the likely achievement of the gen ed outcomes by students	3.10		2.67	2.86
Appropriateness of the assignments or forms of assessment, in relation to the gen ed learning outcomes	2.80		2.67	2.86
Overall, how well does the course address the intended gen ed learning outcomes for the category?	3.00		2.44	2.71

** Mean scores were calculated on a 1-4 scale with 1 = Poor and 4 = Outstanding. “Not enough info” responses were excluded from the analysis.*

VII. Follow-up actions

Two debriefings will be held in fall 2010, one with all the reviewers and the other with the participating faculty members. After the faculty debriefing, individual results will be sent to the faculty members confidentially. Then, the Associate Provost for Undergraduate Education, the Associate Provost for Institutional Effectiveness and the Director of Institutional Assessment will present the aggregated results to the University General Education Committee and meet with department chairs to discuss course offerings, assessment results, issues of particular concern and possible ways to use the results to improve teaching and learning.