

**GEORGE MASON UNIVERSITY  
MASON CORE ASSESSMENT REPORT:  
MASON KOREA SPRING 2014**

The Mason Core (formerly General Education) program at George Mason University organizes courses of study into three main areas. *Foundation* courses build knowledge and skills to promote success in the major and in future pursuits; *core* courses introduce students to a breadth of subject matter and intellectual traditions; and *synthesis* courses encourage the integration of past learning and experiences, develop critical thinking skills, and prepare students for lifelong learning. Student learning outcomes for the Mason Core areas are created and assessed by faculty, primarily through the University Mason Core Committee. Results of assessment activities are reported to the faculty, the Mason community, and the State Council of Higher Education for Virginia (SCHEV) by the Office of Institutional Assessment.

### **Mason Korea**

This is a focused report for the inaugural semester of Mason Korea, located at the Incheon Global Campus in Songdo, South Korea. The branch campus opened in March 2014, with an initial enrollment of 39 students, including 6 students initiating from Mason's campus in Fairfax, Virginia. The assessment provides information about the Mason Core courses that were taught by Mason faculty during the spring 2014 semester.

### **Data Collection and Assessment Process**

The assessment of the Mason Core courses at Mason Korea was conducted in spring 2014 semester. All five Mason Core courses were selected for assessment (see Appendix for the full list). These five courses represented four Mason Core areas: Global Understanding, Quantitative Reasoning, Social & Behavioral Sciences, and Written Communication (lower division). All courses were taught by Mason faculty members in their respective disciplines.

An information session was conducted for faculty members at the Mason Korea faculty orientation in January 2014, followed by individual consultations by request. Each faculty member was asked to create a course portfolio that consisted of a summary sheet, course syllabus, selected course assignments, a course map, samples of student work, and a narrative essay. The portfolios were due at the end of the semester, and were submitted via Blackboard. All five faculty members submitted portfolios as requested.

Portfolio reviews were conducted in summer 2014. Reviewers were members of the University Mason Core Committee and subject matter faculty who participated in a training session that covered the review process and criteria. Reviewers entered ratings and text on a paper review form. Each portfolio received two sets of ratings.

- Total portfolios collected: **5** portfolios representing **5** courses
- Total number of students enrolled: **164** (sum of all 5 courses includes duplicated enrollment across courses)
- Total student work samples reviewed: **31 work samples and 22 exam scores**
- Total reviewers: **4**

The course portfolio review focused on how well each course addressed the respective Mason Core student learning outcomes (see Appendix for full listing) through course instruction, assignments/activities, and samples of student work. Portfolios were assessed on how well the faculty member articulated the learning outcomes, the congruence of the learning outcomes with the course content, the appropriateness of the course material for the Mason Core curriculum, and the appropriateness of the assignments or forms of assessment in relation to the learning outcomes.

### **Results**

Because there were only five courses representing four Mason Core categories, it is not possible to compare courses within each category, as is usually done in the Mason Core course portfolio assessment process. Additionally, the

same 39 students were enrolled in most of the courses, presenting both challenge and opportunity to the understanding of student learning. In consideration of this unique circumstance, reviewers agreed to a holistic approach to the assessment, emphasizing qualitative elements in order to contribute to course and faculty development in this new arena. Results of the review have been aggregated across the Mason Core categories.

Table 1 displays the frequencies for each item on the assessment rubric. As each course was reviewed twice, the total for each item sums to 10. While each pair of reviewers for each course did not come to consensus for every item, the ratings were not sufficiently divergent to require a third review. For instance, in cases in which one reviewer rated a course as “outstanding,” the second reviewer rated the course as “good.” The average rating for each item is displayed in column 6 of the table.

**Table 1:** Course Ratings

	<b>Outstanding</b>	<b>Good</b>	<b>Fair</b>	<b>Poor</b>	<b>Average Rating</b>
Articulation of the Mason Core learning outcomes for students	1	2	3	4	<b>2</b>
Congruence of the Mason Core learning outcomes with the course content and goals	0	8	2	0	<b>2.8</b>
Appropriateness of course material for the Mason Core curriculum	1	6	3	0	<b>2.8</b>
Course structures and procedures that contribute to the likely achievement of the Mason Core outcomes by students	3	5	2	0	<b>3.1</b>
Appropriateness of the assignments or forms of assessment, in relation to the Mason Core learning outcomes	3	7	0	0	<b>3.3</b>
Overall effectiveness of the course in addressing Mason Core learning outcomes	0	7	3	0	<b>2.7</b>

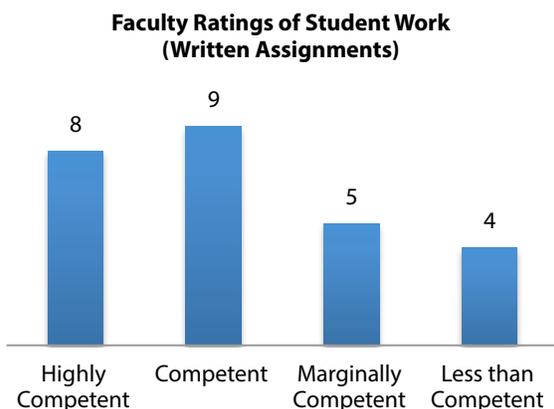
Overall, reviewers rated the courses as either “good” or “fair” for each item. The main issue of concern in these ratings was with the articulation of Mason Core student learning outcomes; reviewers noted that they would like to see a “more robust” syllabus for the courses generally speaking, including identification for students of how the Mason Core learning outcomes are being addressed in the course. Reviewers rated the courses highest overall for course structures and procedures (3.1 average), and appropriateness of assignments in relation to the learning outcomes (3.3). These findings are generally consistent with previous reviews of Mason Core courses, although there are fewer ratings of “poor” and “fair” on the whole for Mason Korea courses.

### **Faculty Ratings of Student Work**

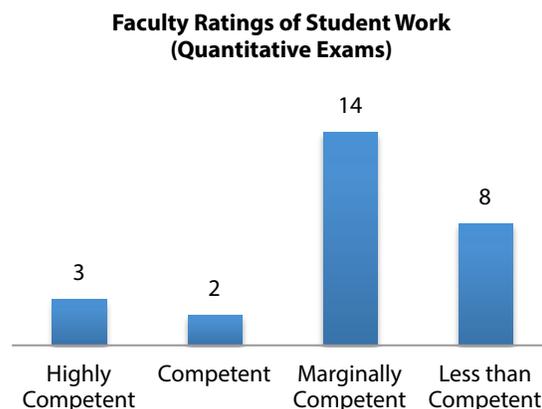
Faculty were asked to submit student work samples from assignments that allowed students to best demonstrate their proficiency on one or more of the student learning outcomes. Students were randomly selected from the enrollment lists for this purpose. The relatively high attrition in these courses meant that the samples represent only the students who persisted in each course. Faculty rated student performance on these samples on a four-point scale, as “highly competent,” “competent,” “marginally competent,” or “less than competent” for the identified learning outcomes. A sum of 31 individual samples were submitted, plus a report of 22 exam scores, for a total of 53 ratings of student work. Figures 1 and 2 illustrate these ratings across all of the work sample submitted, divided into the two types of samples that were submitted: written assignments (Figure 1) and results from quantitative exams from ECON 103 and MATH 113 (Figure 2). The figures show that 17 of 31 (55%) of written work samples were rated as “competent” or “highly competent,” an encouraging finding given concerns about academic writing at the campus (see Summary of Faculty Narratives). Figure 2 shows that samples of quantitative exams were more likely to be rated

as “marginally competent” (14 scores) or “less than competent” (8 scores). Caution should be taken in interpreting the exam ratings, however, as the bulk of these ratings are based on one course, and thus, the findings are skewed. Because of the small numbers of samples and courses in this report, care must be taken in using the numbers to understand student performance altogether.

**Figure 1:** Ratings of Student Work (Written Assignments)



**Figure 2:** Ratings of Student Work (Quantitative Exams)



### Summary of Faculty Narratives

A key component of the course portfolio is the narrative, in which faculty are asked to discuss their experiences in the course in regard to the student learning outcomes, student learning in the course, unexpected findings, and assessment of learning outcomes. Mason Korea faculty were asked to consider the nature of their experience at Mason Korea, and how their instructional approach did or did not differ from their previous experiences at Mason. The narrative also addressed the course context, challenges or issues, experimentation or changes that faculty implemented, and the results of those changes.

Faculty faced common challenges working with students in their first semester at Mason Korea. Most of these challenges were related to the particular circumstances of a new international campus that had not yet been fully realized, above all in terms of facilities and enrollment, as well as other lags in infrastructure development. The challenges in working with students were likely magnified by the small numbers, as well as cultural differences that were complicated by the diverse educational backgrounds and expectations that students brought with them. With a few exceptions, individual students’ grades were fairly consistent across their courses. Thus, students who struggled in one course tended to do so in all of their courses. Because the enrollment was small, several faculty faced the same kinds of challenges with the same students. Faculty who had significant past experiences with Asian students found that they were not adequately prepared for the particular challenges of teaching students on a brand new campus that lacked some of the necessary facilities and services for supporting student needs.

There were two prominent infrastructure problems that negatively affected teaching at Mason Korea this semester. First, faculty reported that the Internet service in the classrooms was either unreliable or nonexistent, which was a minor problem for one professor, but a major problem for at least two others. The second problem was that Mason students did not have access to a physical library. While this issue will be resolved for fall, it created disadvantages for students and some of the faculty in the spring. The problem was especially acute for the composition course, in which students typically learn research skills for the academic library. In the gap, Mason designated a librarian from the Fairfax campus to provide services and resources online. Faculty found that while the digital resources were helpful, not having a library facility created barriers for students who were working on research papers. Additionally (and not a library issue), at least one professor had trouble getting textbooks until well into the semester, a problem that made a substantial impact on instruction.

One of the issues that challenged the faculty in terms of working with students was Korean students' proficiency with reading comprehension and writing for college-level texts. Faculty agreed that while most students demonstrated "good" to "very good" oral fluency, many tended to have some difficulty with the kind of reading and writing that is required of students at university. Two professors commented that students were not adequately prepared to do college-level academic writing, either in English or Korean. One informed faculty member noted that writing instruction is either weak or nonexistent in the Korean school system, implying that Korean students may not have had enough preparation to meet the expectations of academic writing in an American university. Most faculty responded to this issue early in the semester by adding more and different kinds of writing assignments to their courses.

As previously mentioned, the students who faced difficulties in any of their courses faced other barriers to academic success as well. One of the main issues that faculty experienced was student disengagement in their classes. After the first set of grades, many students stopped attending class, and some who did show up tended not to participate in class discussion or activities. Although they showed initial enthusiasm, many students ceased preparing for classes or studying for exams as the semester wore on. One faculty member observed that there appeared to be a general "intellectual disengagement," and two professors noted that students did not seem to be motivated by grades. Some students withdrew from classes or simply stopped attending. On an encouraging note, the students who decided to re-engage with their courses and professors tended to improve their grades and became a positive influence on others in the second half of the semester.

Faculty were proactive and thoughtful about the problems that they faced in their courses. Coupled with their in-class innovations, all of the faculty members provided some kind of extra assistance to students. One faculty member required more individual conferences than initially planned, and all faculty attempted to increase communication with their students. Students were advised to seek tutors, and one professor implemented a regular evening group tutoring session.

All of the faculty members who taught Mason Core courses will return to Mason Korea in the fall semester. Each expressed their hopes for the new semester, and have considered changes to their teaching based on their experiences in the spring. Two faculty members plan to administer individual assessments at the beginning of the semester to place students in the appropriate course (especially for ENGH 100/101 and mathematics). All faculty are contemplating some kind of attendance policy, though each has their own philosophy about this kind of requirement. A couple professors are planning to require individual or small group meetings to address students' particular needs. Two professors are considering how to apply their courses to "real-world" or management settings (as the majority of students are pre-Business majors) as an attempt to engage their students in the Mason Core outcomes.

### **Summary of Reviewers' Comments**

Reviewers were given an opportunity to comment on features of the courses and provide recommendations. In a concluding discussion, reviewers were also asked to make recommendations for the how the university could better support faculty in teaching Mason Core courses at the Songdo campus. This section provides a summary of the reviewers' comments.

Overall, reviewers were impressed with how faculty managed the challenges they faced this inaugural semester, and said that the courses were well designed. Reviewers praised Mason Korea faculty for being flexible in their instruction and for innovating mid-semester, for communicating well with students, and for attempting to create learning communities. Reviewers complimented faculty on their use of clear and detailed assignment instructions and rubrics. In terms of assessment, it was encouraging to see how faculty integrated both formative and summative assessment activities into the courses and used the information to adapt instruction. One reviewer wrote, "The use of multiple instructional and assessment methods (ungraded discussion, exams both multiple choice and short essay, final project) are well-balanced and provide many opportunities to fully engage the Mason Core learning outcomes." The use of placement tests or other assessments was considered "essential" to the math and composition courses in

particular. One reviewer observed, “The instructor has done an excellent job of integrating a scaffolded learning approach in the class that allows students to practice/build skills in a low-stakes environment before assessing those skills in higher stakes culminating experiences (exams).”

As previously reported, reviewers wanted to see better articulation of the student learning outcomes for students. It is a common finding in the portfolio assessment process that courses are praised as good disciplinary courses, but are not necessarily articulated well with the Mason Core learning outcomes. This could be accomplished by using a “more robust” syllabus in which the outcomes are explicitly linked to course goals and assignments. Often, minor changes to course assignments can strengthen course content to support the Mason Core outcomes. While generally, the courses featured strong learning assessment, reviewers pointed to the need for improvement in at least one of the courses, requesting “more forms of formative and summative assessment, and learning at more levels, especially application, analysis, synthesis, and evaluation.”

On the issue of student writing, reviewers who read samples of student work concluded that their facility with language was pretty good overall, but that there is a rigidity to their writing that could be improved with practice and feedback. This could be addressed by adding more writing activities overall, and allowing students to resubmit papers with revisions. For those courses that did not emphasize writing, reviewers recommended integrating some opportunities for students to practice academic writing.

Given the challenges that faculty identified in their portfolios about student learning, reviewers recommended that the institution provide support for assignment design, especially in terms of skill-building and scaffolding of learning. Reviewers were alarmed at learning that students had limited or delayed access to textbooks and online instructional resources like MyMathLab, and wished to convey their grave concern about this matter. Reviewers also expressed the need for learning support like learning fellows (learning assistants) and tutors. And although much is needed to insure student success, one reviewer observed, “This is a challenging course and...I think the instructor has done a great job in light of the resources available (or not available).”

### **Follow-Up Actions**

This report will be shared with participating faculty, course coordinators, and the Mason Korea Institutional Effectiveness Committee to address the issues and concerns that were revealed in the assessment process. Course development resources will be made available to support faculty in their efforts to better align their courses with the Mason Core outcomes. Exemplars will be made available to participating faculty with faculty consent.

## APPENDIX

### Mason Core Courses Taught at Mason Korea in Spring 2014

College	Course	Mason Core Category
College of Humanities and Social Sciences	ANTH 114: Introduction to Cultural Anthropology	Social & Behavioral Sciences
	ECON 103: Microeconomic Principles	Social & Behavioral Sciences
	ENGH 100/101: Composition	Written Communication
	SOCI 120: Globalization and Society	Global Understanding
College of Science	MATH 113: Analytic Geometry/Calculus I	Quantitative Reasoning

## Mason Core Student Learning Outcomes, by Category

### Global Understanding

The goals of Global Understanding are accomplished through disciplinary or inter-disciplinary study with the following three learning outcomes:

1. Demonstrate understanding of global patterns and processes;
2. Demonstrate understanding of the interconnectedness, difference, and diversity of a global society;
3. Explore individual and collective responsibilities within a global society through analytical, practical, or creative responses to problems or issues, using resources appropriate to the field.

### Quantitative Reasoning

The quantitative reasoning learning outcomes are:

1. Students are able to interpret quantitative information (i.e., formulas, graphs, tables, models, and schematics) and draw inferences from them.
2. Given a quantitative problem, students are able to formulate the problem quantitatively and use appropriate arithmetical, algebraic, and/or statistical methods to solve the problem.
3. Students are able to evaluate logical arguments using quantitative reasoning.
4. Students are able to communicate and present quantitative results effectively.

Under each learning goal, faculty teaching Math 106 and Statistics 250 further define course-specific learning objectives that align with the subject matter and the quantitative reasoning skills emphasized in these courses.

### Social & Behavioral Sciences

The following three learning outcomes are required goals of disciplinary or interdisciplinary courses:

1. Explain how individuals, groups or institutions are influenced by contextual factors;
2. Demonstrate awareness of changes in social and cultural constructs;
3. Use appropriate methods and resources to apply social and behavioral science concepts, terminology, principles and theories in the analysis of significant human issues, past or present.

### Written Communication

Following are the overall learning outcomes for lower division Written Communication. For more detail, please see <http://composition.gmu.edu/learning-goals-100-101>.

1. Students improve their ability to write in a recursive process that includes exploration, reflection, invention, inquiry, organization, drafting, revision, peer review, and editing
2. Students demonstrate their ability to analyze and meet the needs of a range of rhetorical situations: they increase their awareness of the expectations of US academic audiences, and develop strategies for anticipating and using audience feedback as they draft, revise, and edit
3. Students gain emerging college-level proficiency in critically reading and in writing nonfiction texts in a range of genres, including (but not limited to) exposition, argumentation, and research-supported writing
4. Students understand the basic principles of and can employ strategies for conducting college-level research, for evaluating sources and for incorporating other voices into their writing