

Frequently Asked Questions about the System-Wide Assessment of Core Competencies

How might the UNC system develop the standardized assessment instrument that's being discussed?

The UNC system is currently in conversations with the Educational Testing Service (ETS) about collaborating on the development of a standardized assessment instrument that will address some of the GEC's priorities and the principles of good assessment that the GEC has endorsed. No formal agreements have been made at this point, but it is hoped that we will be able to work with them starting this summer.

It sounds like UNC faculty would have the opportunity to be involved in item-writing for the standardized instrument. How would that work?

If the UNC system signs a contract with ETS, we hope to collaborate in setting up regional item-writing workshops. We would hope to involve 100-200 faculty members in that process and would work to ensure that all campuses and disciplines were well represented.

What would the timeline for implementation of the standardized assessment pilot phase be, if it goes forward as planned?

The most likely plan would be to develop test items in the fall of 2014 and pilot those test items along with ETS-developed items for the standardized measure in the spring of 2015. Once that initial pilot is complete, including item analysis and refinement and assuring that the subscale scores (scores on subcompetencies) are reliable, a revised measure would be piloted at a larger scale within the system in fall 2015.

How many students would need to take the pilot version of the ETS measure?

Most likely, we would want to test 2,000 to 2,500 students, system-wide, in order to gather meaningful information about the reliability and viability of the test, as well as to accurately determine levels of student performance in the subcompetency areas.

How would the ETS measure be formatted?

There will be forced-choice questions on the test, but there probably also will be some short-answer questions and short-essay questions.

How long would the test be?

At this time, we don't know. There will need to be enough items on the test to reliably assess students' achievement levels in the subcompetencies that the GEC has identified as important, but the GEC does want to ensure that the test will not be so long that it creates inordinate problems in administration and student motivation.

How much autonomy will individual campuses have over the content, administration, and interpretation of the ETS measure?

The GEC's current thinking is that the ETS measure will have a system-wide "core" of items that will be required for all campuses, but that campuses will be able to add items that are targeted toward their particular needs or concerns. The number of students to be tested on each campus will be something that will be determined after the pilot of the new measure, when calculations about the number of students needed for the test results to be reliable are available. Test results will be reported to the institutions as well as to General Administration, and the GEC will work with ETS to develop a structure for the reports of those results so that the reports are as informative (diagnostic) as possible. ETS has also indicated the possibility of providing the test data to institutions in a format to allow campuses to conduct additional analyses based on their own needs and questions.

Each campus will be required to use the ETS measure as part of the process for system-wide assessment of learning outcomes described in the UNC Strategic Directions plan. Of course, campuses already have assessment tools that they are using (or considering) and have other competencies beyond writing and critical thinking that are important. We assume that campuses will continue to develop those assessment tools that meet their needs.

What other issues with regard to the ETS measure is the GEC considering?

One of the issues that the GEC has discussed in depth is the question of how to implement the ETS measure in a way that the test results can be useful in a diagnostic way; that is, how can the test results provide faculty and academic leaders on the campuses with information that is really useful in terms of understanding patterns in what students are learning, and thus able to consider adjustments to teaching strategies, courses, or curricula? This is one of the biggest reasons that the GEC placed a high priority on identifying a test strategy that will allow for examination of students' performance on subcompetencies, since many teaching strategies and assignments are focused on developing those subcompetencies as much or more than the overall competency.

Another issue is the question of how to collect information in a way that promotes a cycle of assessment and improvement, rather than "assessment for assessment's sake." To that end, the GEC is considering the potential value of administering the ETS measure to students as they enter college as well as towards the end of their undergraduate degree program, in part to have a better picture of students' strengths and weaknesses early in the curriculum (and the differences among UNC institutions with regard to those patterns) so that faculty can consider that information in curricular review and planning activities.

How will the UNC system avoid over-reliance on standardized testing as a means of assessment?

The GEC is working to help develop other system-wide modes of assessment by, for example, running e-portfolio pilot projects at a range of constituent campuses. Understanding that multiple perspectives on achievement will be necessary if the assessment results are to be truly useful for faculty and for curricular review or improvement, the GEC is interested in the rich information (both quantitative and qualitative) that rubric-based assessment of students' classroom work, such as that collected in portfolios, could provide to our overall understanding of students' achievement of the identified competencies.

What rubrics are being used for the qualitative-assessment pilot?

The majority of the e-portfolio pilot teams are using the Association of American Colleges and Universities's (AAC&U's) VALUE rubrics for critical thinking and written communication as guidelines, although some teams are modifying those to develop their own rubrics. These seem to line up well with the subcompetencies our faculty members have identified as being particularly important in earlier feedback, although many of the pilot teams are considering how the AAC&U's rubrics may be modified to reflect disciplinary differences as well.