

## **Introduction**

The Assessment Plan for General Education that follows is based upon two beliefs: 1) a sound general education helps students acquire the knowledge, skills, and attitudes they will need to successfully achieve academic, career, and personal goals; and 2) systematic assessment of student learning outcomes can be an effective vehicle for improving teaching and learning.

MJC's Mission recognizes the inherent value of a general education when it states that one of the College's primary goals is "to provide for all students a general education that fosters personal development, intellectual curiosity, and critical thinking to enhance informed and effective participation in society." Consistent with this goal, the College has placed general education at the center of the educational experience of all MJC students whether they pursue a career education or a liberal arts degree.

Explicit in the College's Mission is a commitment to "fostering excellence in teaching [and] facilitating enhancement of learning" by providing "a collegiate environment conducive to the advancement of teaching and learning." The College offers its students a rich learning community with many opportunities for learning experiences both inside and outside of the classroom. On-going student learning assessment can offer faculty, administrators, and other stakeholders the assurance that the college is providing students with a quality general education while at the same time uncovering aspects of the college's instructional and extra-curricular programs that may need strengthening.

## **Accreditation Standards**

In June 2002, the Accrediting Commission for Community and Junior Colleges completely revised the standards an institution of higher education must meet for accreditation. The new standards place increased emphasis on outcomes assessment both for ensuring institutional effectiveness and for the continuous improvement of teaching and learning. Additionally, Standard II.A.3 provides a specific statement of general education expectations.

## **Assessment Workgroup**

In order to develop a program of general education assessment, the College first had to articulate a set of outcomes that would specify the cognitive abilities, content literacy, and value awareness students would be expected to attain by completing their general education requirements at the College. To make these general education outcomes explicit, the College began a dialogue across the academic departments to develop a set of measurable learning outcomes for general education.

Over a two-year period, the College conducted many discussions about what an MJC student completing the general education requirements of his or her curriculum should know and be able to do. These activities culminated in the development of five General Education Learning Outcomes (GELOs), which were approved by MJC's Academic Senate on February 18, 2010. These outcomes represent the skills, knowledge, and values students who complete a program of general education at MJC may be expected to have attained.

During the 2009-2010 academic year, while the discussions about General Education Learning Outcomes were taking place, the College formed the Assessment Workgroup from a broad cross section of the college community including faculty and administrators. The workgroup began

working to develop a process to assess student achievement of the soon-to-be adopted General Education Learning Outcomes.

### **General Education Learning Outcomes (GELOs)**

The five General Education Learning Outcomes stated below have been developed with an understanding that responsibility for the general education curriculum is a college-wide responsibility. Since the general education goals and outcomes make up the foundation for all the major programs of study, students should have many opportunities to achieve these desired outcomes in numerous courses across the curriculum and through extra-curricular experiences.

1. Demonstrate proficiency in Natural Science by explaining how the scientific method is used to solve problems and describing how scientific discoveries and theories affect human activities.
2. Demonstrate proficiency in Social and Behavioral Science by describing the method of inquiry used by the social and behavioral sciences, describing how societies and social subgroups have operated in various times and cultures, and analyzing the ways that individuals act and have acted in response to their societies.
3. Demonstrate proficiency in the Humanities by demonstrating awareness of the various ways that culture and ethnicity affect individual experience and society as a whole and demonstrating the ability to make well-considered aesthetic judgments.
4. Demonstrate proficiency in Language and Rationality by demonstrating awareness of the interactive nature of communication involving effective listening, reading, writing, and speaking; demonstrating critical thinking in the analysis and production of communication, and demonstrating the ability to find, evaluate, and use information in a variety of formats.
5. Demonstrate proficiency in Health Education by describing the integration of the physiological and psychological human being, analyzing the development of self and making plans for lifelong learning, and evaluating the impact of daily decisions on life and health.

### **Definitions of Assessment**

In the literature on outcomes assessment, there are many definitions, though most share similar characteristics. The following definitions have been found to be useful and in agreement with MJC's goals for the assessment of student learning. Assessment can be described as "the systematic collection, review, and use of information about educational programs undertaken for the purpose of improving student learning and development." [Marchese, *AAHE Bulletin*, 40, 1987, 3; quoted in Palomba & Banta, *Assessment Essentials*, 1999, 8] Angelo elaborates on this basic definition: "Assessment is an ongoing process aimed at understanding and improving student learning. It involves making our expectations explicit and public; setting appropriate criteria and high standards for learning quality; systematically gathering, analyzing, and interpreting evidence to determine how well performance matches those expectations and standards; and using the resulting information to document, explain, and improve performance. When it is embedded effectively within larger institutional systems, assessment can help us focus our collective attention, examine our assumptions, and create a shared academic culture dedicated to assuring and improving the quality of higher education." [Thomas A. Angelo, *AAHE Bulletin*, November 1995, 7]

## **Assessment Rationale**

MJC recognizes three important uses for assessment. Its principal use is “to improve both the quality and quantity of learning for students as well as to respond to their personal development needs.” [Volkwein, *Implementing Outcomes Assessment*, 5] Assessment gives the College a powerful tool to help discover whether students have acquired the knowledge, skills, and competencies consistent with the aims for general education set out in the College’s Mission and its Philosophy of General Education. “Students’ academic, attitudinal, and behavioral outcomes are the primary source of assessment data ... [and] [provide information about the effectiveness of the curriculum, advising, faculty development, ethnic diversity goals, and external linkages with other segments of education.” [Halpern, Diane F. 9ed0> *Student Outcomes Assessment: What Institutions Stand to Gain*. New Directions for Institutional Research. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 1987, 24-25]

A second reason the College conducts assessment is for accountability, that is, to be able to “demonstrate our education effectiveness to external stakeholders.” [Volkwein, *Implementing Outcomes Assessment*, 5] MJC must show the ACCJC accrediting team how it uses assessment to improve teaching and learning in its academic programs in order to meet Standard II.A. ACCJC will be looking at the College’s efforts to assess the effectiveness of its general education curriculum.

Finally, assessment can be a means to bring more cohesiveness to general education as a program of study. The development of General Education Learning Outcomes has brought both the design and aims of the general education curriculum into clearer focus. The plan for assessing these goals takes a programmatic approach to assessing learning outcomes. The responsibility for coordinating this effort rests with the Assessment Workgroup working in tandem with individual departments and faculty. “The programmatic approach considers general education as a whole with [a set of] identifiable outcomes and [with] different disciplines contributing to each of those outcomes. The principal advantages of this approach are (a) its comprehensive treatment of the subject, (b) its facilitation of assessment ‘beyond the individual section and instructor level,’ (c) its feasibility for implementation within an achievable and sustainable level of effort, and (d) the extent to which this approach fits most regional accrediting association expectations.” [Nichols, *General Education Assessment for Improvement of Student Academic Achievement*, 19]

## **General Education Assessment Campus Roles and Responsibilities**

Assessment of general education at MJC is an integrated and on-going college-wide effort undertaken to improve teaching and learning. The following is a list of the principal stakeholders along with a description of the roles they play.

### **Students**

- Take an active role in learning
- Participate fully in the assessment techniques of the classroom
- Develop self-assessment skills
- Work with faculty as partners in learning

## **Faculty**

- Incorporate assessment in the early stages of instructional planning
- Use assessment tools to identify student learning needs
- Contribute to the effective implementation of course and curricular changes based on assessment results

## **Staff**

- Help foster optimal campus learning environment with appropriate student support services
- Provide student learning opportunities and experiences outside of the classroom
- Assist faculty in developing effective assessment strategies
- Serve on college assessment workgroups and participate in college assessment activities

## **Instructional Deans**

- Support faculty in the development of effective assessment techniques
- Work with faculty to develop and assess course learning outcomes
- Use outcomes assessment data to support curriculum review
- Collect and organize input from faculty for departmental reports

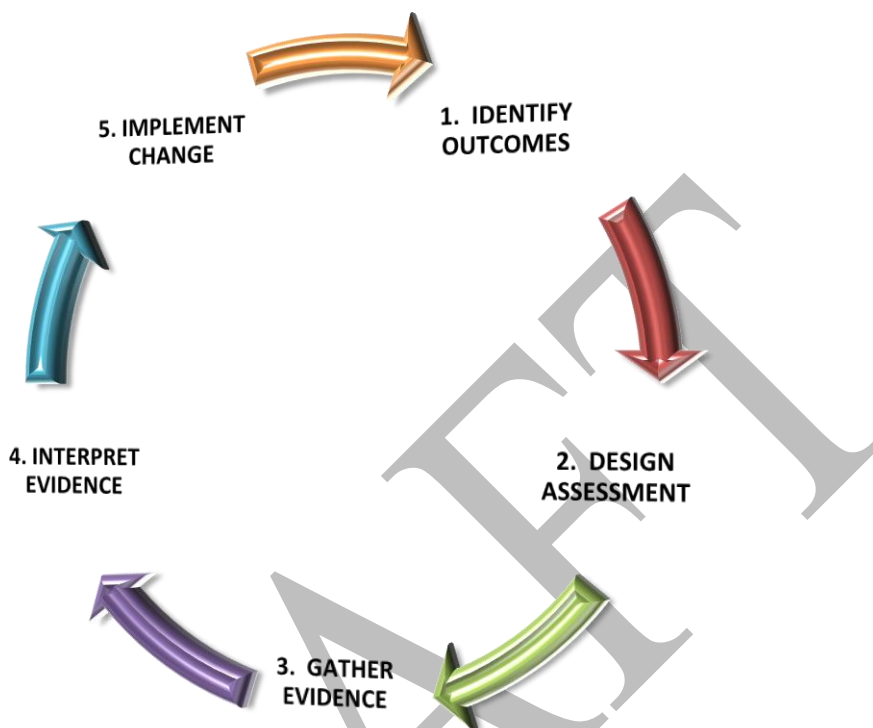
## **Assessment Workgroup**

- Articulates the purposes and goals of general education outcomes assessment
- Works with faculty to effectively assess student achievement at the classroom level
- Works with division deans to effectively assess student achievement at the course and program levels
- Works with support services staff to effectively assess extracurricular student achievement
- Develops and delivers professional development programs on general education outcomes assessment
- Organizes and administers the reporting of general education assessment results
- Gathers and reviews information regarding what MJC does to assess at all levels
- Reviews and approves assessment reports and facilitates college-wide discussions of specific assessment findings

## **The Assessment “Loop”**

As stated earlier under “Definitions of Assessment,” the student learning assessment literature contains many descriptions of the assessment process with most accounts sharing common elements. The Assessment Workgroup came to understand outcomes assessment as a cyclic process of “inquiry and improvement” in which a set of learning outcomes that support aspects of the institutional mission and its programs are measured using appropriate assessment instruments against pre-established performance criteria. Disparities between performance expectations and actual assessment results form the basis for dialogue and possible action. When the results of assessment activities are used to bring about improvement in teaching or learning, it is described as “closing the loop.” The cycle then begins anew either to assess different

outcomes or to check to see if the changes implemented as a result of earlier assessments have achieved the intended results. The cyclic nature of this process can best be shown as a diagram:



[adapted from Maki, “Developing an Assessment Plan . . .” *Journal of Academic Librarianship*, Vol. 28, Issues 1/2, January/March 2002]

### **General Education Assessment Plan**

MJC’s general education assessment plan covers the first two steps outlined in the above graphic. The plan is set up as a three-column grid (see Appendix A).

#### **Step 1: Identify Outcomes**

This step represents the first two columns of the accompanying assessment plan grid. The five General Education Learning Outcomes have been placed in the first column. The specific assessment tasks have been placed in the second column.

#### **Step 2: Design Assessment**

The third column of the accompanying assessment plan grid presents the means used to assess each specific assessment task and the criteria that would signal reasonable success in student achievement of the desired outcome. The means of assessment, the criteria for success, and the student populations to be assessed will be determined by the academic departments working with the Assessment Workgroup through the departmental representatives. At least two measures for each learning outcome will be identified. Finally, a reasonable timetable for collecting, analyzing, and interpreting the assessment

data will be created by the Assessment Workgroup (See [Appendix B](#)). Built into the timetable will be a pilot period for each assessment task prior to full implementation in order to test the validity of the chosen assessment instruments and benchmark reasonable criteria for success.

### **Implementing the Plan**

As the plan is implemented according to the timetable, the College will begin to carry out Steps 3-5 of the assessment cycle, that is, collect assessment data (Step 3), analyze the findings (Step 4), and recommend and implement appropriate changes (Step 5). Such changes would include modifications as necessary to either the General Education Learning Outcomes or the assessment methods.

#### **Step 3 Gather Evidence**

The defined assessment instruments will be used to collect the required data according to the timeline. The data collection processes will be coordinated by the Assessment Workgroup and the Office of Institutional Research and Planning. Assessment result data will be compiled and presented in a meaningful way for analysis and dissemination to the college community.

#### **Step 4 Interpret Evidence**

Assessment data will be disseminated to the college community to serve as a basis for faculty discussion and possible action. The differences between what faculty expected (as stated in the criteria for success) and the actual results of student performance will either be cause for celebration (if the outcomes were achieved) or will suggest areas that require attention (if the actual results fall short of expectations).

Some questions that might be considered at this stage are:

- Were sufficient learning opportunities provided for students to attain the desired level of performance?
- Were the assessment instruments valid measurements of the intended outcomes?
- Were the actual levels of student performance less than, equal to, or greater than the expected (or desired) levels of performance as expressed in the criteria for success?
- Were the criteria for success reasonable, or were they set too low or too high?
- If the criteria for success were reasonable but fewer students than expected attained the desired level of performance, what might the reasons be?

#### **Step 5 Implement Change**

In response to the findings, the College will decide what actions should be taken to improve either the reliability of the assessment methods or the achievement of the intended learning outcomes. As appropriate, any implemented changes will be reassessed in subsequent cycles to determine whether the changes were effective in bringing about the desired improvement.

## **Conclusion**

The College is committed to better identifying how well its students are attaining the General Education Learning Outcomes and to supporting all aspects of the assessment process to facilitate improvement of teaching and learning. From the assessment of General Education Learning Outcomes, the College will learn to:

- “assist students in the improvement of their learning
  - assist faculty in the improvement of curricula and instructional activities
  - assist in reviewing and revising academic programs and support services
  - assist in planning, conducting and supporting professional development activities
  - assist in planning and budgeting for the provision of academic programs and services.”
- [*Characteristics of Excellence*, p. 53]

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