

Report of the General Education Outcomes Task Force

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The need to establish learning outcomes for Plymouth State University's (PSU) General Education program and to assess student achievement of those learning outcomes has been identified as a priority since the current General Education program was first introduced in 2005. Despite repeated and varied efforts by the General Education Committee, this goal has not yet been achieved. PSU's accrediting body, the New England Association of Schools and Colleges (NEASC) has made it clear that PSU must make it an institutional priority to design and implement a plan to assess General Education. The General Education Committee fully supports this recommendation.

In 2016-2017, members of the General Education Committee and two Cluster Guides formed the General Education Working Group (GEWG) for the purpose of considering general education learning outcomes and assessment. In April 2017, the GEWG held a retreat to create a draft set of outcomes and rubrics for assessing the outcomes. The group reviewed the University mission, identified themes throughout the PSU General Education program, and considered assessment through the lens of the VALUE rubrics (which can be found [here](#)) developed by the American Association of Colleges & Universities (AACU). After extensive discussion, the GEWG identified four habits of mind, or ways of thinking and engaging with the world, that PSU students will acquire and strengthen through their participation in general education. In addition, the GEWG created rough drafts of rubrics for assessing the outcomes. (Details of the work done by the GEWG were included as a report to the faculty on the May 2017 faculty meeting agenda and can be found [here](#).)

The General Education Committee discussed the GEWG Retreat Report in May 2017 and agreed to continue the work on outcomes and assessment. The General Education Committee requested that the Faculty Governance Steering Committee form a task force of 5-7 faculty members, to be called the General Education Outcomes Task Force (GEOTF), before the end of the spring 2017 semester. The General Education Committee recommended that at least one member of the GEWG (more if appropriate) serve on the GEOTF. Five faculty members volunteered to serve on the GEOTF. Two of the five—Cathie LeBlanc and Joey Rino—were also members of the GEWG.

Charge to the General Education Outcomes Task Force:

1. The General Education Outcomes Task Force (GEOTF) shall get feedback from the faculty about the four outcomes created by the General Education Working Group (GEWG) and clarify and revise the "definition" and "framing language" for each outcome.
2. The GEOTF shall review and revise the draft rubrics created by the GEWG and get feedback from the faculty about them. The GEOTF shall then revise the rubrics as appropriate.

3. The GEOTF shall bring the finalized set of outcomes and rubrics to the faculty for a vote no later than the October 2017 faculty meeting.

In May 2017, the GEOTF began its work by reviewing the Steering Committee Charge, the General Education Handbook and the GEWG Retreat Report. In particular, the GEOTF reviewed and discussed the four habits of mind identified by the GEWG—Purposeful Communication, Problem Solving, Informed Citizenship, and Creative Thinking—and the draft rubrics created by the GEWG for each of those four habits of mind.

Guiding Principles

As we embarked on our charge of clarifying and revising the draft outcomes and rubrics, we agreed to abide by the following guiding principles in our work:

1. Outcomes and rubrics should be designed to provide information about the effectiveness of the General Education program as a whole (as opposed to individual components of the General Education program), as well as about student attainment of the habits of mind.
2. Outcomes and rubrics should reflect a strengths-based, rather than a deficit, approach in describing students' levels of attainment of the outcomes.
3. Outcomes and rubrics should reflect the knowledge and skills encompassed in the General Education program as it currently exists, rather than as we might desire it to be.
4. Outcomes and rubrics should be written so that they can be used in all general education courses, regardless of the discipline of the course. That is, the language of the outcomes and rubrics should be understandable across disciplines.
5. Outcomes and rubrics should focus on knowledge and skills that can be observed and assessed in all general education classes.

We also kept in mind that our charge focused on the review and revision of the outcomes and rubrics, rather than designing an assessment plan. We anticipate that the General Education Committee will request the creation of another task force to develop the assessment plan.

Key Decisions

The Guiding Principles provided us with a lens through which to review the excellent work of the GEWG. Through an intensive process of scrutinizing and discussing the GEWG's draft habits of mind and rubrics, we arrived at the following key decisions.

We envisioned a student's journey through the General Education program as being similar to ascending a mountain—starting at basecamp, climbing, and eventually, after much effort, reaching the summit.

With this metaphor in mind, we decided not to use rubrics, which are traditionally associated with grading finished products. Instead, we designed benchmarks, which are intended to show where students are in the process of developing habits of mind.

The benchmarks for each habit of mind identify signposts, which are the significant elements comprising each habit of mind. For each signpost, the benchmark shows three levels of attainment:

- Basecamp represents the level we can reasonably expect students to attain by the end of their first year at PSU. We anticipate that some students will enter with knowledge and skills already at the Basecamp level for some or all signposts. Just as climbers use their time in basecamp to become acclimated, acquire tools they'll need for the climb, and plan their ascent, PSU students will have opportunities and experiences during their first year to develop the skills and knowledge they will need to move to higher levels.
- Climbing represents the next higher level of skill and understanding in relation to each signpost. Climbing is the process a student undertakes while traveling through General Education; thus, in the benchmarks, the climbing level is depicted as “longer” than either of the other two levels. Students may find some climbing level signposts easier to reach than others, just as some parts of the trail are easier to traverse than others when ascending a mountain.
- Summit, by design, represents a sophisticated level of skills and understandings that will be challenging but achievable for students to reach. We anticipate that students will demonstrate summit level skills during their senior year. General Education capstone courses would provide ideal opportunities for students to demonstrate that they have attained the summit. Climbers who ascend to the summit are rewarded with inspiring views and new perspectives on where they have been. Similarly, Capstone courses could provide opportunities for students to look back on their progress through General Education and reflect on what they have learned and how they will apply their skills and understandings in the future.

The GEWG had identified four habits of mind: Purposeful Communication, Problem Solving, Informed Citizenship, and Creative Thinking. After a careful review of the GEWG's habits of mind, we made some revisions to the descriptions and elements (signposts) for Purposeful Communication and Problem Solving. In particular, we tried to convey that problems can take many different forms and vary widely in scope, and that Problem Solving does not follow a linear sequence, but is an iterative process.

Members of the GEOTF who also served on the GEWG shared insights about the intentions of that group regarding the Informed Citizenship habit of mind. We concluded that the name, Informed Citizenship, did not accurately reflect the intentions of the GEWG. After much deliberation, we changed the name to Integrated Perspective and made some revisions to the benchmark for it.

The GEWG had significant discussion about whether Creative Thinking should be included as part of Problem Solving or should be a habit of mind on its own. In reviewing that discussion, the GEOTF decided to incorporate Creative Thinking as part of the Problem Solving habit of mind.

We then went back to the General Education Handbook and discovered that the development of lifelong learning skills is explicitly mentioned throughout the document as a desired outcome of the General Education program. To capture this aspect of the General Education program, we identified Self-Regulated Learning as a Habit of Mind that is integral to the program.

The four habits of mind we have identified—Purposeful Communication, Problem Solving, Integrated Perspective, and Self-Regulated Learning—are consistent with research about the skills and habits of mind that will equip students well for life and work after college.

Habits of Mind Descriptions

Purposeful Communication is a habit of mind characterized by the construction of meaning through interactions with texts and people and the creation of new messages. "Text" refers broadly to any communicative message, including, but not limited to, messages that are spoken or written, read or listened to, non-verbal, and/or delivered through any form of media (digital, social, artistic, print, etc.). Construction of meaning and creation of messages are influenced by individuals' prior experiences as well as cultural and historical contexts. Creation of messages involves the development and purposeful expression of ideas and is designed to increase knowledge, foster understanding, and/or promote change in others' attitudes, values, beliefs, or behaviors. To be effective, messages must engage the perspectives of others and foster dialog among individuals and the community.

Problem Solving is a habit of mind that involves an iterative process of identifying, explaining, and exploring problems, describing challenges, envisioning possible solutions and their implications, and making decisions about how to proceed based on all of these considerations. Problem solving encompasses a broad array of activities and approaches. Problems range widely in scale and scope—small to large, local to global, well-defined to ambiguous, simulated to real-world—and problem solving may be undertaken individually or in collaboration with others. In all cases, engaging in problem solving requires the ability to think creatively, adapt and extend one's thinking, acknowledge different contexts and incorporate different perspectives, embrace flexibility, consider potential implications, determine courses of action, persist and adapt despite failure, and reflect on the results. While the types of problems encountered and the strategies used to grapple with problems vary across disciplines, the problem solving habit of mind is relevant to all disciplines.

Integrated Perspective is a habit of mind characterized by the recognition that individual beliefs, ideas, and values are influenced by personal experience as well as multiple contextual factors—cultural, historical, political, etc. All human beings are interconnected through their participation in natural and social systems. An integrated perspective recognizes that individual decisions impact the self, the community, and the environment. Students will acknowledge the limitations of singular points of view and recognize the benefits of engaging with and learning from others in order to integrate multiple perspectives for effective communication, problem-solving, and collaboration.

Self-Regulated Learning is a habit of mind that encompasses the desire to learn, the ability to set personal goals for learning, and the capacity to engage in a self-monitored learning process.

Self-regulated learners demonstrate strong commitment to the process of learning and take responsibility for their own learning. They take intellectual risks, persist in the face of challenges, and learn from their mistakes. They are able to organize and reorganize information, interpret information in new ways, and generate their own ideas. Self-regulated learners demonstrate metacognitive awareness (an understanding of the factors that influence their own learning) and cultivate the skills and confidence they need in order to be effective learners.

Benchmarks

See the Appendix

Assessment using the Benchmarks

- The habits of mind are intended to span all General Education courses. Our intention is to assess the effectiveness of the General Education program as a whole rather than assessing the individual components of the program. We, therefore, purposefully avoided identifying habits of mind that correspond to a specific component of our current program. For example, we are not developing a Habit of Mind and benchmark specifically about the Creative Thought Direction. Instead, assessments of any or all habits of mind could be made in every General Education course.
- We do not expect every student to enter PSU at the basecamp level in each signpost for a particular habit of mind. We view basecamp as attainable in a student's first year at PSU. Determining the percentage of students at basecamp, then later at the climbing and summit levels, could be one way to assess the effectiveness of the General Education program.
- We do not intend these benchmarks to be used like traditional rubrics. They are meant to gauge the growth of students as they progress through the General Education program, not as mechanisms to assess the quality of individual assignments.
- Given the complexity of data gathering across all four habits of mind, we recommend that the development of an assessment plan begin with a pilot program using a subset of General Education courses. We suggest that the pilot program be used to develop a data collection process that is not burdensome to faculty teaching General Education courses.

Next Steps for the GEOTF

- Finalize the framing language for each habit of mind. We will include language on each benchmark expressing the idea that the benchmark should be used to gauge students' current level of sophistication regarding the associated Habit of Mind and should not be used to assess the quality of an individual assignment.
- Share our work with the General Education Committee and Curriculum Committee before University Days. We will ask these two committees in particular for their feedback on our work.
- Hold a University Days session to elicit feedback from faculty regarding the plausibility of using the habits of mind and benchmarks in their General Education classes. As these benchmarks have been created, considered, and refined by two separate groups, our intent

for the University Days session is not to refine language, debate specific signposts, or consider new benchmarks. Rather, we will seek information regarding the support and resources faculty would need in order to teach general education courses with an eye toward these habits of mind.

- Utilize faculty feedback to provide any needed clarification to descriptions, benchmarks and/or framing language and to prepare our final report to the faculty.
- Report to the General Education committee by the end of September 2017.
- Present completed habits of mind to faculty for a vote of endorsement at the October 2017 faculty meeting. As the adoption of these habits of mind will not require a revision of the current General Education program this will not be a binding vote to approve the habits of mind.

Glossary

Habit of Mind – a usual way of thinking and engaging with the world. For example, one way of engaging with the world is to habitually think about communicating with a purpose.

Benchmark – each habit of mind is comprised of a list of 3-5 items that will be used to assess student work. These items are called signposts. The assessment will indicate the level of accomplishment of the student on the signpost. For example, the Purposeful Communication habit of mind has a benchmark comprised of 4 signposts.

Signpost – an item used for the assessment of student work on a particular habit of mind. For example, one signpost of the Purposeful Communication habit of mind is Awareness of Context. We will assess student work to determine the sophistication of their awareness of the context(s) of their communication when they are engaged in the communicative act.

Appendix

Purposeful communication is a habit of mind characterized by the construction of meaning through interactions with texts and people and the creation of new messages. "Text" refers broadly to any communicative message, including, but not limited to, messages that are spoken or written, read or listened to, non-verbal, and/or delivered through any form of media (digital, social, artistic, print, etc.). Construction of meaning and creation of messages are influenced by individuals' prior experiences as well as cultural and historical contexts. Creation of messages involves the development and purposeful expression of ideas and is designed to increase knowledge, foster understanding, and/or promote change in others' attitudes, values, beliefs, or behaviors. To be effective, messages must engage the perspectives of others and foster dialog among individuals and the community.

Purposeful Communication			
Signposts	Base Camp	Climbing	Summit
Awareness of Context	Recognizes that every message is created and received within a cultural and historical context	Draws on knowledge about cultural and historical context, in both the creation of messages and the construction of meaning from messages	Seeks additional knowledge to understand the cultural and historical context, in both the creation of messages and the construction of meaning from messages
Comprehension	Shows understanding of the basic meaning of the text by paraphrasing or summarizing the information the text communicates	Uses information in the text, general background knowledge, and/or specific knowledge of the context in which the message was created to draw more complex inferences	Recognizes that the text has implications beyond its explicit message; identifies broader questions raised by the text; and/or suggests counterarguments in response to the text.
Purposeful Expression	Paraphrases, summarizes, and/or quotes from information sources to create a message with a specific purpose	Organizes and synthesizes information from relevant sources to create a clear message with a specific purpose	Organizes and synthesizes information to create a clear message containing new insights that achieves a specific purpose
Effective Application of Strategies for Communication	Recognizes that others may bring different perspectives and experiences to the creation of messages and the construction of meaning from messages	Uses communication strategies that take into account the perspectives of others and encourage the exchange of ideas and information	Tailors communication strategies to effectively involve and/or address different audiences, foster respectful dialogue, and build relationships based on mutual understandings

Problem Solving is a habit of mind that involves an iterative process of identifying, explaining, and exploring problems, describing challenges, envisioning possible solutions and their implications, and making decisions about how to proceed based on all of these considerations. Problem solving encompasses a broad array of activities and approaches. Problems range widely in scale and scope—small to large, local to global, well-defined to ambiguous, simulated to real-world—and problem solving may be undertaken individually or in collaboration with others. In all cases, engaging in problem solving requires the ability to think creatively, adapt and extend one’s thinking, acknowledge different contexts and incorporate different perspectives, embrace flexibility, consider potential implications, determine courses of action, persist and adapt despite failure, and reflect on the results. While the types of problems encountered and the strategies used to grapple with problems vary across disciplines, the problem solving habit of mind is relevant to all disciplines.

Problem Solving			
Signposts	Base Camp	Climbing	Summit
Problem Framing	When presented with a problem, describes key components of the problem	Explains the problem clearly and concisely so that others can understand it and articulates relevant components of the problem in detail	Explores multiple perspectives on the problem and incorporates those perspectives in explaining and describing the problem
Challenge Identification	Recognizes general challenges to solving the problem	Describes, in detail, challenges that are relevant to the particular problem and how it was framed	Surveys the problem from various points of view in order to uncover additional challenges and determine the ways in which challenges are interrelated
Plan Development	Relies on one or two strategies to identify possible solution(s) to the problem	Uses strategies appropriate to the situation to develop possible solutions to the problem	Employs a repertoire of relevant strategies and perspectives to develop possible solutions to the problem and explores the potential implications of those solutions
Decision-Making and Revision	Identifies a preferred approach to solving the problem and sticks with the plan	Takes into account the nature and scope of the problem, potential challenges, and possible solutions, and makes a case for a specific course of action, revising the plan as needed in response to ongoing feedback	Weighs the potential implications of possible solutions in order to determine the most desirable course of action, providing a strong justification for that decision, and revising the plan as needed in response to ongoing feedback
Evaluation of Progress	Evaluates progress in terms of whether desired outcomes have been achieved	Identifies and evaluates evidence to determine whether there has been progress toward achieving the desired outcomes	Reflects on positive and negative impacts of strategies employed and understandings gained from the problem-solving process

Integrated Perspective is a habit of mind characterized by the recognition that individual beliefs, ideas, and values are influenced by personal experience as well as multiple contextual factors—cultural, historical, political, etc. All human beings are interconnected through their participation in natural and social systems. An integrated perspective recognizes that individual decisions impact the self, the community, and the environment. Students will acknowledge the limitations of singular points of view and recognize the benefits of engaging with and learning from others in order to integrate multiple perspectives for effective communication, problem-solving, and collaboration.

Integrated Perspective			
Signposts	Base Camp	Climbing	Summit
Self-Awareness	Recognizes that one's ideas, beliefs, and values are influenced by personal experience as well as multiple contextual factors	Recognizes that one's perspective influences the ways in which one understands and interprets the natural and social world	Considers multiple perspectives and adjusts one's own ideas, beliefs, and values as appropriate
Perspective Seeking	When presented with various perspectives, recognizes their validity while maintaining a preference for one's own perspective	Acknowledging the limitations of a singular perspective, seeks to understand various perspectives and how they came to be	Seeks to augment one's own limited perspective with others, even those that may be conflicting
Interconnectedness	Identifies some connections between an individual's personal decision-making and the larger natural and social world	Analyzes the ways that an individual's or a group's decision-making influences and is influenced by the larger natural and social world	Analyzes and explains the interconnectedness between and within natural and social systems and how shifts within those systems create changes
Collaboration	Articulates one's own perspective and listens to other perspectives when collaborating with others	Compromises between own perspective and others' perspectives when working collaboratively	Critically analyzes different perspectives and purposefully communicates to contribute to an optimal outcome

Self-Regulated Learning is a habit of mind that encompasses the desire to learn, the ability to set personal goals for learning, and the capacity to engage in a self-monitored learning process. Self-regulated learners demonstrate strong commitment to the process of learning and take responsibility for their own learning. They take intellectual risks, persist in the face of challenges, and learn from their mistakes. They are able to organize and reorganize information, interpret information in new ways, and generate their own ideas. Self-regulated learners demonstrate metacognitive awareness (an understanding of the factors that influence their own learning) and cultivate the skills and confidence they need in order to be effective learners.

Self-Regulated Learning			
Signposts	Base Camp	Climbing	Summit
Responsibility for Own Learning	Strives to meet learning goals and evaluation criteria embedded in assignments and courses	Identifies goals for improving as a learner, seeks help and resources if needed, and asks for and responds to feedback from others	Sets high expectations for oneself and develops a plan to meet those expectations
Engagement in the Learning Process	Recognizes that acquiring new knowledge and skills requires commitment to the learning process	Investigates ideas and questions and persists in the face of challenges, recognizing that mistakes provide opportunities for learning and that learning takes time	Generates ideas and questions, takes intellectual risks, displays resourcefulness in grappling with challenges, and shows confidence in own ability to learn
Metacognitive Awareness	Identifies own strengths and weaknesses as a learner and selects general strategies to aid learning	With feedback or prompting, reflects on own thinking and learning and chooses strategies to strengthen understandings and skills	Reflects independently on own thinking and learning and uses strategies effectively to strengthen understandings and skills