

**Tip Sheet #16:  
Academic Foundations  
March 13, 2006**

The good news is that we appear to be making progress on the assessment front. We start with a reminder that this week graduate programs should submit their list of outcomes in keeping with the ALC approach. The deadline is March 15. We expect to see assessment plans by the end of the semester.

But the focus of this approach is on Academic Foundations, student coursework at the beginning of their careers. By signing on to this approach and rolling out a manageable strategy for measuring, we not only help General Studies to develop a distinctive character but we also provide a viable alternative to the national exam that is currently under federal consideration. Here are some questions that get us down the Academic Foundations road:

***Why Academic Foundations?***

We have settled on “Academic Foundations” as an integrated way to talk about how learning in the early stages should provide the right orientation and skills to the more sophisticated demands that will follow in students’ majors. Formally, Academic Foundations entails First Year Experience, General Studies, the university diversity requirement, and student activities.

***What is the “final” matrix model of the domains?***

We went through several iterations before developing a very clean 4x4 matrix. Each of the common ability domains was broken out into some special areas of emphasis. The original matrix was larger but we migrated some portions to distribute activities especially across General Studies.

<b>CRITICAL THINKING</b>	<b>COMMUNICATION</b>	<b>VALUES/ INTEGRITY</b>	<b>PROJECT MANAGEMENT</b>
Analysis/Evaluation	Writing	Academic Integrity	Project Skills
Problem Solving	Speaking	Personal/Cultural Values	Self-Regulation (deadline skills)
Creativity	Quantitative Reasoning	Ethical Reasoning	Team Work Skills
Info Literacy	Tech/Visual Literacy	Diversity Skills	Service Learning/ Civic Engagement

***What happened to the “content” domain?***

We are not including the “content” domain on advice of our consultant Barbara Walvoord. The multiple avenues that students take through their first two years of higher education discourage measurement strategies that address content; common content would be hard to target and might produce more uniformity than would be healthy for a university curriculum.

***What is the basic strategy for covering the domains via Academic Foundations?***

We are asking departments to commit to collecting data on outcomes in a minimum of two of the 16 grid areas in the matrix. Of course, departments can target and measure more than two areas if they choose, but we think a minimum of two in each General Education or Academic Foundations area will help us provide coverage in a way that justifies the character of the matrix. In addition, we ask that General Studies departments choose a “primary area” that falls within a specified domain shared by other departments in the same distribution (e.g., Natural Science, Social Science). The secondary area chosen by the department can be either in the same domain or any place else on the grid. The primary areas include

<b><i>Distribution Area</i></b>	<b><i>Class</i></b>	<b><i>Domain</i></b>
Communication (2)	Composition	Communication (Writing)
Math (2)	Math	Communication (Quant Literacy)
Social Science (3)	Mixed	Critical Thinking
Humanities (3)	Mixed	Values
Natural Science (2)	Bio/Chem/Phys/ES	Project Management

Notice that by completing the distribution requirements, students get substantial practice across the primary domains. Incorporating a secondary domain then provides appropriate practice.

***So how should this system work in reality?***

Departments must decide what configuration of abilities makes the most sense to commit to. You should pick the abilities and outcomes that you want to monitor in terms of assuring yourselves that you are doing high quality work. The syllabi should reflect the Academic Foundations expectation. Many teachers of Foundations courses will submit an outcomes report at the end of the Fall semester so discussion of the results can take place during the Spring and the results can be written up in the annual report.

***How about an example?***

Let’s take History. Since this department officially is in the Social Science distribution area, the primary outcome area is *Critical Thinking*. History could choose *Analysis* or *Information Literacy* as reasonable ways to express their primary outcome. If they choose *Analysis* as primary, they might opt for *Information Literacy* as the secondary or perhaps choose *Writing* in the *Communication* domain instead. If it made sense to the department, the faculty could opt to monitor progress in all three, but that would be a choice of the department, not a requirement coming from assessment managers.

***Will all General Education courses have to submit reports?***

No. We plan to measure outcomes only in the Fall as a way of cutting back on the work involved in monitoring progress in Foundations. In addition, if a department offers more than one section of a course, the department can randomly select 50% of those courses for measuring as long as the courses share outcomes and syllabi for the tracking that you plan to do. However, if the syllabi, assignments, and course plan differ substantially, the department's understanding of achievement will be better through separate monitoring.

***Do we have to keep track of individual student progress?***

No. Our plan emphasizes program evaluation rather than individual "certification." This interpretation is consistent with discussions by Board of Governors to date and we hope this strategy will prevail. Let's hope it stays that way.

***What if we haven't decided yet?***

Get a move on. The sooner you can commit to the outcomes that are important for you to contribute to the foundation, the easier it will be to produce an assessment plan that will help you monitor quality. If you need help, contact Jane Halonen at [jhalonen@uwf.edu](mailto:jhalonen@uwf.edu) or Claudia Stanny at [cstanny@uwf.edu](mailto:cstanny@uwf.edu).