

University of Massachusetts/Association of American Colleges and Universities
Proposal
“Achieving Liberal Education Outcomes: an Evidence-based Assessment System”

The University of Massachusetts, in collaboration with the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) requests a grant of \$341,226 to develop an evidence-based assessment system of liberal education outcomes at the University of Massachusetts.

Higher education is in the midst of extraordinary demands for accountability. The demands come from many places and with many voices, but the common refrain focuses on colleges being able to enhance student learning, especially in areas where American students seem not to be performing particularly well. It is a conversation that has been occurring in school systems for several years and is now extending to higher education.

In recent years, many organizations have engaged in identifying the types of skills and abilities that students need in the 21st century to be successful in a global economy. For example, the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) just released surveys of CEOs in companies across the country indicating that they need employees who have a broad set of abilities commonly referred to as liberal education (AAC&U, 2007, *College Learning for the New Global Century*). These are the essential learning outcomes of:

- Knowledge of Human Cultures and the Physical and Natural World, through study in the sciences and mathematics, social sciences, humanities, histories, languages, and the arts
- Intellectual and Practical Skills, including inquiry and analysis, critical and creative thinking, written and oral communication, quantitative literacy, information literacy, and teamwork and problem solving
- Personal and Social Responsibility, including civic knowledge and engagement – local and global, intercultural knowledge and competence, ethical reasoning and action, and foundations and skills for lifelong learning
- Integrative Learning, including synthesis and advanced accomplishment across general and specialized studies

In Massachusetts, much work has been done to align learning expectations or standards for graduating high school seniors so they are well prepared for entry into the state’s public universities. The University of Massachusetts is the primary recipient of most of these students.

The next step needed is to revisit the general education curriculum on the University campuses – the curriculum that lays the educational foundation for students and that portion of the curriculum that touches all students regardless of major - to ensure that it brings students to higher levels of challenge and performance in the essential learning outcomes identified locally and nationally. Each of the four undergraduate/graduate University campuses has a general education curriculum, but each approaches that curriculum differently depending on its mission and traditions.

It is exactly this variation in mission and tradition that has been the strength of American higher education, and remains so today. However, by examining the general education curriculum through the lenses of both the standards developed for high school graduates that prepare them for college, and in light of the essential learning outcomes emerging from business and educational organizations across the country for what students need to succeed in the new global arena, UMass has the opportunity to provide a curriculum, regardless of the specific campus attended, that advances all students toward those levels of competence necessary for success in today's society.

These efforts must be viewed within the overall K-16 continuum so that common expectations and preparation are aligned as students move through their educational careers. The missing component in many of these conversations about curriculum reform is the lack of focus on exactly "what" students need to learn, "how" students will learn the desired outcomes, and "the level of mastery" required for success upon graduation. The focus on "how" students learn the curriculum and "the level of mastery" will inform and facilitate reform and innovation in general education programs that will promise greater success for the broad range of students found on our college campuses now and in the future.

The project proposed here will improve the University of Massachusetts general education curriculum, the learning environment, assessment of undergraduate learning outcomes, and the cost effectiveness of general education courses - all important objectives of the Davis Educational Foundation.

Project Description:

This project will bring together academic leadership from the President's office, campus faculty academic leadership and AAC&U to examine ways in which re-examination of general education learning outcomes and redesign of curriculum can enhance the coherence, clarity, and impact of general education and improve retention of students. The University of Massachusetts comprises five campuses, four undergraduate/graduate and a medical school. It serves approximately 45,000 undergraduate students and grants over 11,000 degrees a year.

The President's Office oversees the five campuses and will play a key leadership role in the coordination and implementation of this grant. The University is currently part of a 22 system national initiative to raise graduation rates while reducing the achievement gap for low-income and minority students (under the auspices of the National Association of System Heads). It is also a founding member of the Redesign Alliance, a membership organization whose mission is to encourage course redesign to increase student success and access while maintaining or reducing instructional costs. These two initiatives are conceptually embedded within the proposed activities of this grant proposal.

Purposes:

- Clarify the purpose of general education for students and faculty in the 21st century.
- Define outcomes of general education for students and faculty in the 21st century. Mapping the goals of general education across the system and on the essential outcomes identified by AAC&U and others would provide a common ground for working across campuses.
- Develop assessment strategies for measuring general education student learning outcomes for use by the campuses and the UMass President's Office.

Deliverables and measurable outcomes:

Short-term (length of grant)

- Statement of general education outcomes for students graduating from UMass
- Curriculum matrices which identify general education learning outcomes embedded in each general education course
- Assessment activities aligned with curriculum map which measure each student's achievement of general education outcomes prior to graduation

These outcomes are of highest priority for the campuses in terms of necessary accountability and accreditation standards

Long-term (5years from start of initiative)

- Increased retention rate from first year to sophomore year (as determined by base line to be taken as of fall 07)
- Increased satisfaction of students with educational experience (to be measured by individual campus surveys currently used)
- Increased student learning (as determined by base line to be taken in fall 08)

These outcomes are a high priority for the University as evidenced by its participation in the national NASH initiative, systemic participation in NSSE and its focus on the Board of Trustees' strategic priority of enhancing student learning.

Activities:

- A convening of faculty and administrators from each campus regarding purpose and outcomes of general education
- Scheduled campus workshops to develop curriculum matrices indicating where and how the general education curriculum embodies the desired purposes and outcomes.
- Scheduled summer institute workshops to explore new strategies, including technological, for assessing general education outcomes This is where the work that faculty are already doing in their classrooms, i.e. assignments they give students and the products resulting from those assignments that faculty use for grading, are shared across campuses to sustain effective assessment and to be used for curriculum reform. Having similar outcomes and expectations shared among the campuses, but allowing different ways to demonstrate the learning associated with those outcomes, can give the UMass System a way to have conversations across campuses about the quality or standard of learning without

having to rely on standardized tests or artificial activities divorced from the curriculum.

- Scheduled workshops with faculty and others to discuss strategies by which general education curriculum, particularly first year courses which are identified as courses with high numbers of grades of D, F or W, may be redesigned to improve learning outcomes.

Timeline:

3 years

Year One

- Summer Convening on purpose and outcomes
- Gather data on current general education curriculum and assessment practices across the campuses. Inventory of what is being done and for what purposes, including examples. Survey of assessment instruments available nationally to measure general education outcomes
- Campus-based convenings to discuss campus general education outcomes and assessment; gathering of campus data to share in system-wide workshops.
- Data gathering on general education courses with high D, F, W rates for consideration as courses in need of redesign

Year two

- Summer institute leading to written statements on outcomes, levels of mastery, and assessment practices, including mapping onto curriculum on each campus.
- Based on mapping exercise, implement assessment practices as pilots in selected outcome areas, especially high D, F, W courses.
- Conduct workshops on each campus to support faculty assessment activity.

Year three

- Summer institute to present findings of pilot projects on each campus – lessons learned, remaining obstacles, learning outcome findings.
- Full implementation of general education assessment on all campuses
- Workshops to support faculty implementation on each campus.
- Revising general education campus statements if necessary.

Rationale:

The University of Massachusetts, like many other higher education institutions, faces increased pressure to meet standards of accountability. Graduation and retention rates are one important and easily recognized measure of accountability [remove receiving additional attention]. The University is part of a 22 system national initiative to increase graduation rates for all students with a corollary emphasis on closing the gap between white and minority and/or low-income students. To that end, we intend to look closely at student success within the first year of college and address issues that impact student success. General education curriculum is one of the key components of the academic experience within the first year. Increased clarity and coherence of general education, as well as improved pedagogy and focus on student learning outcomes, should enhance student success in the first year.

Additionally, each campus will be preparing for accreditation visits within the next five to six years. Assessment of learning outcomes has been an issue for each of the campuses in its last accreditation review. Each campus must demonstrate improved ability in assessment of learning outcomes for both general education and majors. This initiative with AAC&U will assist the campuses in reviewing and revising the campuses' current assessment practices.

The project will focus on bringing together at the summer convenings representation from the President's Office, Provosts' office, campus deans, and faculty leadership in the area of general education. Each campus has a committee or similar entity connected to the faculty governance body which is responsible for general education curriculum; leadership from these entities will be invited to participate.

The Project Advisers will be drawn from AAC&U staff and consultants who have deep experience nationally and on campuses with the trends, strategies and research related to General Education reform, implementation and outcomes assessment. AAC&U has been a leader nationally in both maintaining a focus on the importance of general education and the relationship between general education and study in the major. In addition, AAC&U has a long history of working through projects and individually with campuses across the country to enhance student learning. The Project Advisers will both work with the campus leadership teams at the summer institutes, as well as be available for individual campus workshops during the academic year as the campuses work on their design and implementation projects between institutes. We anticipate that in some instances, specialized consultants may need to be invited to a campus to address specific campus-based issues or challenges.

One of the long term goals of this project will not only be capacity building on the individual campuses within the University, but also capacity building in the President's Office for a model of how to address system-wide goals for the future. By creating the capacity and the framework to conduct and to sustain successful cross-campus collaborations, the UMass system will be positioned to advance educational progress for the majority of students in Massachusetts regardless of the specific foci or issues that arise after the grant period is completed.

Budget Narrative

The primary expense is to support the work of four campus-based teams of eight individuals who will lead the review of general education outcomes, curriculum mapping and identification of assessment strategies. The groups will meet once a year to promote cross-campus sharing of ideas, insights and strategies. Campus teams will meet throughout the year to accomplish specific tasks identified in the annual meeting.

The project will be coordinated from the University's President's office with one-fifth of the Associate Vice President's time assigned to coordination and monitoring of the project activities and progress toward goals.

The other significant area of expense will be travel and related costs for AAC&U staff that will provide expertise to the campuses regarding curriculum mapping and assessment strategies. AAC&U is known for its work in the area and its participation in this grant will enable the University to achieve the stated outcomes.