

April 6, 2015

Jennifer Lindholm, Assistant Vice Provost
Division of Undergraduate Education

Re: Report on Western Association of Schools and Colleges (WASC) Expectations for Assessing “Core Competencies” within Undergraduate Education & Recommendations for UCLA Action

Dear Jennifer,

Thank you for visiting the Undergraduate Council on March 20, 2015 to discuss the recommendations from the UCLA “Core Competencies” Workgroup. The council appreciates all of the work that has gone into preparing UCLA’s upcoming mid-cycle WASC review and the relatively new expectation that we address core competencies in undergraduate education.

The council supported each of the three recommendations in your workgroup’s report. In particular, we are committed to modifying the Program Review Manual to include language about core competencies as suggested in recommendations 2a and 2b. The suggestion that we develop a charge letter for review teams was also well received. These will be part of a larger effort to update the program review process that the Undergraduate and Graduate Councils will undertake during this quarter in preparation for the 2015-16 academic year (and the 2016-17 program review cycle).

Please regard this letter as endorsement from the Undergraduate Council to proceed with the recommendations of the Core Competencies workgroup. If you have any questions, please contact me (x69449; jwg@chem.ucla.edu) or Undergraduate Council Analyst Matt Robinson (x51194; mrobinson@senate.ucla.edu).

Sincerely,



Jim Gober, Chair
Undergraduate Council

Enclosure

cc: Matt Robinson, Committee Analyst, Academic Senate
Pat Turner, Dean and Vice Provost, Undergraduate Education

Date: March 3, 2015

To: James Gober, Chair, Undergraduate Council

From: “Core Competencies” Workgroup

Re: Report on Western Association of Schools and Colleges (WASC) Expectations for Assessing “Core Competencies” within Undergraduate Education & Recommendations for UCLA Action

Between October 2014 and February 2015, the Core Competencies Workgroup¹ met to develop recommendations to the Senate with respect to how UCLA:

- a. should define five “core competencies” (critical thinking, information literacy, quantitative reasoning, written communication, and oral communication) that campuses in the WASC region are now expected to evaluate within the context of baccalaureate education; and
- b. can most effectively incorporate evaluating, and reporting on, those core competencies as part of our ongoing efforts to evaluate student learning outcomes within baccalaureate degree-granting programs.

This report provides a brief overview of UCLA’s existing accreditation commitments related to learning outcomes assessment, presents the new WASC expectations with respect to core competencies, addresses corresponding workgroup efforts, and offers the workgroup’s associated recommendations.²

I. UCLA’s Existing Commitments to Accreditation Related to Assessing Learning Outcomes

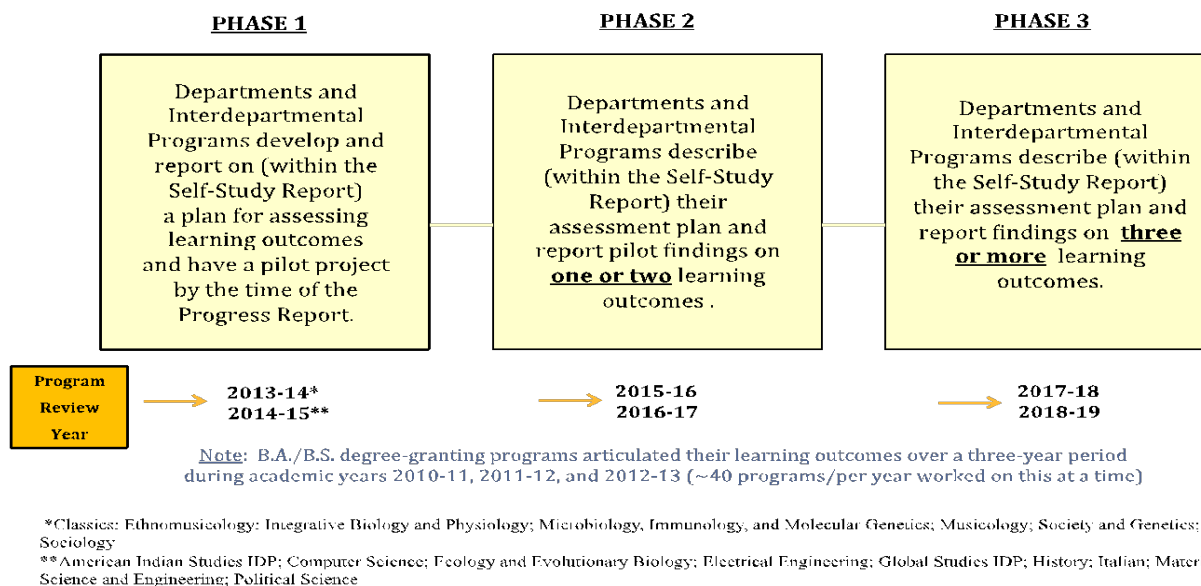
UCLA successfully completed its last WASC reaccreditation review in 2010, receiving commendation for the “exemplary way in which the campus engaged each stage of the accrediting process.” (wasc.ucla.edu). At the end of the review, the major ongoing activity was UCLA’s implementation to engage departments and interdepartmental programs in the assessment of learning outcomes, especially for undergraduates. This work has continued on pace, with leadership from key Academic Senate committees and Assistant Vice Provost Jennifer Lindholm of the Division of Undergraduate Education. UCLA’s efforts to establish sustainable practices in accordance with new accreditation-related expectations have been facilitated greatly by WASC’s willingness to permit UCLA to: (a) experiment with approaches that are institutionally meaningful and (b) establish associated timelines that are manageable. UCLA continues to embrace its role as a leader among the region’s research universities with respect to responding to evolving WASC expectations and sharing publicly our associated efforts.

¹ For workgroup membership, see Appendix A.

² Toward completing this charge, workgroup members reviewed prominently cited definitions for each core competency; analyzed the degree to which the learning outcomes that faculty have already created for UCLA’s baccalaureate-degree granting programs overlap with the five competencies; considered the likelihood that faculty responsible for departments/programs where particular core competencies are *not* addressed within the current learning outcomes could revise those articulations to ensure coverage; and reviewed potential options for addressing core competencies outside of academic majors, including through the General Education curriculum. We also discussed approaches that other institutions are taking.

In keeping with commitments made during UCLA’s last WASC reaccreditation process, all departments and interdepartmental programs have established expected learning outcomes for undergraduate majors (learningoutcomes.ucla.edu). The Academic Senate has also formally incorporated the evaluation of learning outcomes into the Academic Program Review process and established a multi-year plan for rolling out associated programmatic expectations (Figure 1).

Figure 1: Eight-Year Program Review & Outcomes Assessment Timeline



UCLA’s next WASC review process begins in Spring 2019 with an Offsite Review. The Accreditation Visit is scheduled for Spring 2020. In addition to honoring reaccreditation-related commitments made during the last review cycle, UCLA will also be accountable during the upcoming review cycle for addressing new expectations for assessing learning outcomes that were introduced within the WASC region in 2013 and pertain to “core competencies.” Specifically, by Spring 2019, UCLA must be prepared to report on each of the five core competencies with respect to undergraduate student learning, providing (as may be potentially requested as part of the process) illustrative evidence of how those competencies are evaluated within and across majors, as well as how information gleaned through evaluative processes has been used to enhance undergraduate curricula and associated programming.

II. Responding to New WASC Expectations for Assessing Learning Outcomes

The new (2013) WASC Handbook states that baccalaureate programs must: “ensure the development of core competencies including, but not limited to, written and oral communication, quantitative reasoning, information literacy, and critical thinking” (p. 30). More specifically:

The institutional review process calls upon institutions to describe how the curriculum addresses each of the five core competencies, explain their learning outcomes in relation to those core competencies, and demonstrate, through evidence of student performance, the extent to which those outcomes are achieved. If they wish, institutions may create their own limited list of essential higher-order competencies beyond the five listed. They may also report student performance in majors or professional fields and in terms of institution-level learning outcomes that make the institution’s graduates distinctive. The institution analyzes the evidence according to its own judgment, reports on student achievement of its learning outcomes in a way that makes sense for the institution (e.g., as a single score, or within ranges or qualitative categories), contextualizes

the findings according to the mission and priorities of the institution, and formulates its own plans for improvement, if needed. For example, for each core competency, the institution may set a specific level of performance expected at graduation and gather evidence of the achievement of that level of performance (which can be based on sampling) using the assessment methods of its choice.

The five core competencies listed in the Handbook are relevant in virtually any field of study, though different fields may define these outcomes in different ways and may also include other outcomes. At many institutions, it is the assessment of learning in the major or professional field that engages faculty and produces the most useful findings. Thus institutions may wish to embed assessment of core competencies in assessment of the major or professional field. Capstones, portfolios, research projects, signature assignments, internships, and comprehensive examinations provide rich evidence that can be analyzed for multiple outcomes, both specialized and common to all programs, at a point close to graduation as determined by the institution. Whatever the expectations and findings, they need to be contextualized and discussed in this component of the institutional report.

It is the institution's responsibility to set expectations for learning outcomes that are appropriate to the institution's mission, programs offered, student characteristics, and other criteria. The Commission is not seeking a minimum standard of performance that students would already meet upon entry or upon completion of lower-division general education courses. Nor does it seek outcomes common to all institutions irrespective of mission. Rather, the Commission seeks learning outcomes and standards of performance that are appropriately ambitious, that faculty and students can take pride in, and that can be explained and demonstrated to external audiences. If a given competency is not a priority for the institution or a particular field of study, expectations may legitimately be lower. Within the context of the institution's mission, the evaluation team then weighs the appropriateness of outcomes, standards, and evidence of attainment.

Standards of performance are best set through internal discussion among faculty and other campus educators. Although it is not required, institutions may benefit from external perspectives and collaboration with other institutions, e.g., through benchmarking or use of comparative data. For example, an institution may join a consortium that shares assessment findings and calibrates desired levels of performance. (2013 WASC Handbook, p. 30)

To provide institutions with rudimentary guidance, the 2013 WASC Handbook glossary also offers the following core competencies definitions:

Critical Thinking: *The ability to think in a way that is clear, reasoned, reflective, informed by evidence, and aimed at deciding what to believe or do. Dispositions supporting critical thinking include open-mindedness and motivation to seek the truth. (p. 47)*

Information Literacy: *The ability to “recognize when information is needed and have the ability to locate, evaluate, and use the needed information” for a wide range of purposes.³ An information-literate individual is able to determine the extent of information needed, access it, evaluate it and its sources, use the information effectively, and do so ethically and legally. (p. 51)*

Quantitative Reasoning: *The ability to apply mathematical concepts to the interpretation and analysis of quantitative information in order to solve a wide range of problems, from those arising in pure and applied research to everyday issues and questions. It may include such dimensions as ability to apply math skills, judge reasonableness, communicate quantitative information, and recognize the limits of mathematical or statistical methods. (p. 55)*

Written Communication: *Communication by means of written language for informational, persuasive, and expressive purposes. Written communication may appear in many forms, or*

³ Quoted text reflects language extracted from the information literacy definition articulated by the Association of College and Research Libraries.

genres. Successful written communication depends on mastery of the conventions of the written

language, facility with culturally accepted structures for presentation and argument, awareness of audience, and other situation-specific factors. (p. 58)

Oral Communication: Communication by means of spoken language for informational, persuasive, and expressive purposes. In addition to speech, oral communication may employ visual aids, body languages, intonation, and other non-verbal elements to support the conveyance of meaning and connection with the audience. Oral communication may include speeches, presentations, discussions, dialogue, and other forms of interpersonal communication, either delivered face to face or mediated technologically. (p. 53)

Based on these and similar definitions from other sources, including various professional associations and the extant literature, the workgroup began by reviewing the learning outcomes that UCLA faculty have already articulated for baccalaureate degree-granting programs to consider the extent to which those outcomes may encompass any, or all, of the five core competencies. This analysis revealed that 100% of UCLA’s 128 baccalaureate degree-granting programs have at least one currently articulated learning outcome that addresses critical thinking. Most programs also directly address information literacy (84%), written communication (79%) and oral communication (70%). Quantitative reasoning is the least universally reflected core competency; 33% of B.A./B.S. degree-granting programs currently include at least one learning outcome that directly addresses associated skills and abilities. Table 1 illustrates the current coverage of core competencies within the College of Letters and Sciences and the Professional Schools.

Table 1. Core Competencies as Currently Addressed in Existing Learning Outcomes for the Baccalaureate Degree, by Unit/School (percentages)^{1,2}

Unit/School	B.A./B.S Programs	CT	IL	WC	OC	QR
College of Letters and Science						
Physical Sciences Division	23	100	96	74	74	70
Life Sciences Division	11	100	100	73	73	50
Social Sciences Division	15	100	100	87	53	40
Humanities Division	48	100	71	75	71	0
Institutes for Interdisciplinary Instruction	9	100	89	100	89	33
Individual Field of Concentration	2	100	100	100	0	100
School of Theater, Film, and Television	2	100	0	50	50	0
School of Nursing	1	100	100	100	100	0
School of the Arts and Architecture	8	100	75	50	38	13
Henry Samueli School of Engineering and Applied Science	9	100	100	100	100	100
	128	100	84	79	70	33

¹These determinations are based exclusively on workgroup review of existing learning outcomes.

²As noted in Figure 1, UCLA faculty established learning outcomes for undergraduate majors during academic years 2010-11, 2011-12, and 2012-13 (i.e., prior to introduction of the core competency expectation). As such, faculty have not been asked to consider their curricula within the specific context of evaluating core competencies and, as feasible, to ensure that learning outcomes addressing each core competency are directly articulated.

The 2013 WASC Handbook acknowledges that, within particular fields of study, selected competencies may not be prioritized focal points, and includes an accompanying directive that, “It is the institution’s responsibility to set expectations for learning outcomes that are appropriate to the programs offered” (p. 30). In line with these sentiments, the workgroup believes that faculty who are responsible for a given undergraduate program should determine whether a particular core competency can be evaluated meaningfully within the upper division curriculum for the major. Upon reviewing UCLA’s existing learning outcomes for undergraduate programs and considering what would seem to be reasonable expectations for student learning within selected types of degree-granting programs, workgroup members

also concur that, in many cases, it is likely that making relatively minor modifications to existing learning outcomes will ensure that, within most majors, all core competencies can be readily evaluated.

In keeping with UCLA's tradition of evaluating academically-oriented student learning outcomes within the majors, the workgroup also believes that program faculty should determine how each competency is most appropriately defined and evaluated within their particular fields of study. In academic units/schools where selected core competencies are not, in fact, "core" to the major itself (e.g., quantitative reasoning, as traditionally defined, within the Humanities Division or the School of Theater, Film, and Television), the workgroup concurred that faculty who are responsible for those majors should *not* be encouraged to "add on" assignments purely for purposes of evaluating that competency "at or near the time of graduation" (the stated period when evaluation of each core competency should be carried out as noted in the 2013 WASC Handbook, p. 30).

For students who enter UCLA as freshmen, and who ultimately pursue fields of study where quantitative reasoning is *not* an integral part of upper division coursework within the major, successful completion of the university's longstanding quantitative reasoning requirement⁴ coupled with General Education (GE) requirements in the Scientific Inquiry and the Society and Culture Foundation Areas should suffice.⁵ The workgroup believes that the rigor of UCLA's GE program provides appropriate assurance that students who complete majors where quantitative reasoning is not "core" to upper division requirements within the major will have successfully completed other coursework which focuses on that core competency. Thus, they may be expected, upon graduation, to have developed robust and practical habits of mind such that, within the quantitative reasoning realm, they will be able to function as personally and civically responsible members of society.⁶ In the case of students who complete some or all of their GE coursework elsewhere *and* major here in fields where quantitative reasoning is not a central focus, it is the workgroup's understanding that UCLA applies well-established, rigorous standards for accepting coursework that is completed at other institutions. As such, those completions should also suffice.

Ultimately, workgroup members concur that the new core competency evaluation and reporting expectations should be viewed as an opportunity to refine UCLA's continuing efforts to incorporate outcomes-based assessment as a tool for understanding and enhancing student learning within academic programs. UCLA has already established a solid framework, foundation, and timeline to engage academic units in this work. Further, the responsiveness that faculty in most units have demonstrated in addressing the ever-evolving, externally-driven expectations related to undergraduate education should enable the campus to incorporate this newest requirement without inordinate difficulty.

⁴ UCLA's quantitative reasoning (QR) requirement was last reviewed comprehensively by a faculty workgroup during academic years 2003-04 and 2004-05.

⁵ As noted in the last (2008) self-review report on the Society and Culture Foundation Area, "All UCLA GE courses are expected to hone and strengthen undergraduate academic skills in the areas of critical thinking, writing, information literacy, oral communication, and problem solving" (p. 19). With respect to problem-solving that is inherently more quantitative in nature, required coursework in the Society and Culture Foundation Area is specifically designed to engage all undergraduates in core learning experiences that include "...how data is collected and analyzed, and how new understandings of social phenomena are achieved and evaluated." Required Foundations for Scientific Inquiry coursework is designed, in part, to "ensure that students gain a fundamental understanding of how scientists formulate and answer questions about the operation of both the physical and biological world."

⁶As part of its Academic Program Review process, UCLA has a longstanding tradition of evaluating regularly the GE curriculum. Reflecting the rigor of the GE component of a UCLA undergraduate education, the Society and Culture and the Scientific Inquiry Foundation Areas have been described, respectively, in their most recent Senate review closure reports as "well and seriously administered" and "a jewel in the crown of the academic experience provided the undergraduates at UCLA [and] a model for all others to emulate."

III. Recommendations

Building on information elaborated previously in this report, the Core Competencies Workgroup encourages:

1. Continued communication and collaboration

Correspondence from the office of the Dean and Vice Provost for Undergraduate Education should be sent (no later than the beginning of Spring quarter 2015) to the heads of all departments and interdepartmental programs that offer baccalaureate degrees. Specifically, the correspondence should:

- a. Provide information about the new WASC expectations for evaluating Core Competencies (including WASC definitions of each competency to provide some consistent foundational context) along with a reminder regarding the timing of UCLA's next WASC reaccreditation review and associated expectations for the campus regarding learning assessment.
- b. Request that program faculty review their existing learning outcomes for undergraduate majors to determine whether current articulations address each core competency clearly. If they do not, program faculty should be encouraged to consider what revisions can be made to address core competencies as appropriate. Revisions, as applicable, should be sent to Assistant Vice Provost Jennifer Lindholm no later than July 1, 2015 to facilitate updating each program's posting on the campus learning outcomes website (www.learningoutcomes.ucla.edu). In cases where program faculty may determine that it is *not* feasible to address a given core competency within a particular major, such indication should be sent to Dr. Lindholm, along with a brief accompanying rationale.
- c. Include a reminder that Dr. Lindholm is available to respond to questions or concerns and to consult with program faculty regarding learning outcome interests and considerations.

2. Revision of Senate Program Review Guidelines

The strength of UCLA's program review process will continue to play an essential role in the success of campus efforts to incorporate outcomes-focused approaches to evaluating student learning. Prior to the Fall 2015 meetings that orient chairs to UCLA program review processes and expectations, text within the current Senate Review Guidelines that pertains to "learning outcomes assessment" should be revised. Specifically:

- a. The existing language should be modified to include the importance of ensuring that evaluative considerations regarding the core competencies are integrated within the unit's outcomes planning, evaluation, and reporting in association with the program review process.
- b. The guidelines should also remind faculty that, when addressing selected core competencies within the self-review report, a brief description of how they are defining that competency within the context of their particular field of study should also be included. If, in the judgment of program faculty, the curriculum for a designated major does *not* appropriately enable evaluation of a given core competency beyond expectations satisfied through other coursework required for UCLA baccalaureate degree completion, such explication should be noted in the self-review report.

Finally, to aid review teams in their efforts to provide feedback on topics that are germane for all UCLA baccalaureate degree-granting programs (including, but not limited to, considerations related to evaluating student learning outcomes), the Senate should develop a charge letter for review team members that highlights general guidelines for conducting the review and articulates the topics that must be addressed within the review report. This information is currently spread through multiple documents; these various documents should be checked for consistency and condensed into a concise message for review teams as they embark on the site visit.

3. Sustained commitment to understanding and enriching student learning

As noted earlier, UCLA has established a thoughtful, long-term approach to addressing reaccreditation-driven expectations for establishing and assessing student outcomes. That approach is designed to empower faculty to be responsive in ways that are both meaningful and manageable for their academic programs. Beyond the fundamental need to satisfy “accountability” considerations, it should be underscored that there are potentially compelling educational benefits that accrue when faculty actively:

- a. engage students in discussion about what they are expected to learn (and why);
- b. encourage them to take ownership of their educational choices;
- c. involve them in curricular and programmatic discussions;
- d. challenge them to evaluate their own progress in achieving desired outcomes; and
- e. enable them to showcase their knowledge, skills, and abilities.

These investments may require faculty and students alike to think in new ways about undergraduate learning and teaching. To ensure that UCLA remains a leader in facilitating the success of its undergraduates, the faculty’s emerging commitment to outcomes-oriented evaluation of student learning must be actively supported. Academic units that embrace innovative approaches to understanding and enriching student learning also should be rewarded for their efforts.

Appendix A
Core Competencies Workgroup Members

Lisa Audish
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Paul Barber
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Troy Carter
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Barbara Knowlton
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Jennifer Lindholm (*Chair*)
Assistant Vice Provost, Undergraduate Education

Sally Maliski
Associate Professor & Associate Dean for Academic Affairs, Nursing

Thomas O'Connor
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