THE
UNIVERSITY
OF RHODE ISLAND
DEPARTMENT OF
PSYCHOLOGY

Choices for Using Assessment to Transform General Education in Higher Education

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October 16, 2013

THINK BIG WE DO℠

A Play in Three Acts

- Prologue: Context at URI
- Act I
  - Choices for getting started on Gen Ed assessment
  - Early findings
- Act II
  - Choices for assessment in transition toward a new gen ed program
  - Findings over two years of a first-year seminar pilot
- Act III
  - Choices while heading into the new program

Setting the Scene: The Context at URI

- Mid-sized public university (15,000)
- 8 colleges in addition to Arts & Sciences = multiversity
- "General education" program last altered in 2004 with "integrated skills" – structure unaltered for 20 years
- New "cognitive" learning outcomes established in 2005
- New Provost and President express displeasure with complex, unpopular, out-of-date requirements
- Work on revision of general education begins 2008
- New "Learning Outcomes Oversight Committee"

Choices for Assessment

1. Program
   - Boundaries; Focus -- What is the "independent variable"
2. Client
   - Whose decisions will be informed (targets for reporting)
   - Who has a role in design of questions, methods, analysis
3. Outcomes
   - Definition
   - Selection for study
4. Sample
   - Students, courses
   - Aims for generalizability
5. Evidence (measurement methods)

Choices for Assessment: Act I

- Retro-fitting learning outcomes to the existing program:
  - Standing general education committee vs. blue-ribbon committee
  - SAGE (Subcommittee on Assessment of Gen Ed) is born
- Focusing learning outcomes
  - Skills (e.g. writing, speaking) vs. core knowledge areas (e.g. natural sciences
- Sampling
  - (courses; assignments; direct-indirect)
- Reporting early findings – external accountability
  - General education committee vs. LOOC vs. faculty senate vs. RI OHE

Approved General Education Learning Outcomes at URI

- **General Education Cognitive Learning Outcomes**

In academic and non-academic settings, with respect to fine arts and literature, humanities and letters, the natural sciences, and the social sciences, students will be able to:

- **Identify** basic concepts, theories, and developments;
- **Recognize** issues, as well as aesthetic and literary elements and forms;
- **Ask** questions appropriate to the modes of inquiry;
- **Collect** information relevant to the questions raised; and exhibit
- **Analyze** the information in order to address the questions or solve problems

- **General Education Integrated Skills**

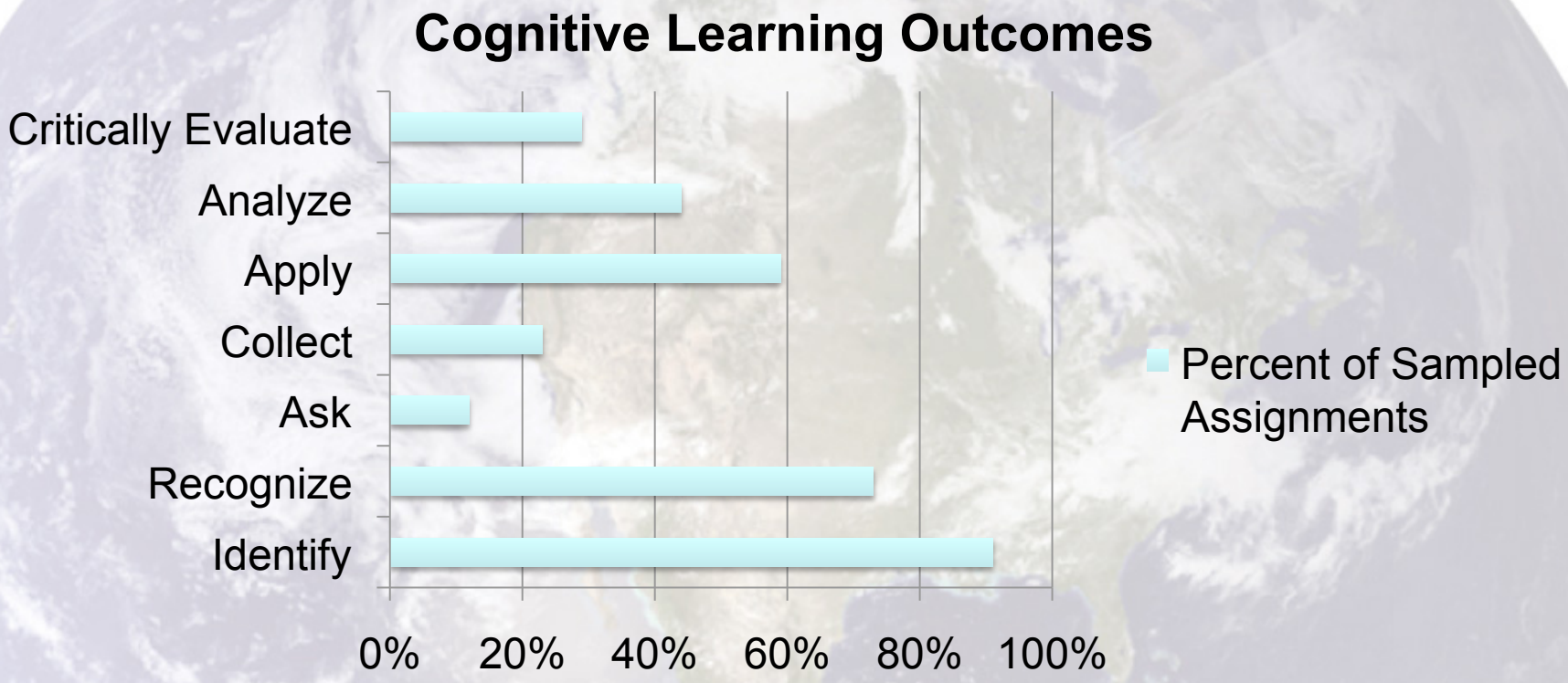
Each course in General Education must also incorporate opportunities for students to practice three (3) or more of the following skills:

Reading complex texts	Using quantitative data
Writing effectively	Using qualitative data
Speaking effectively	Demonstrating information literacy
Examining human differences	Engaging in artistic activity

Choices for Assessment: Act I

- Sample from Fall 2007 general education courses
  - Stratified by size and core knowledge area
- Indirect (self-report): Students surveyed at the end of the semester
  - approximately 173 sections were invited
  - 105 participated, yielding 3,609 student responses
- Direct (student work sample):
  - 55 assignments were submitted by instructors from 50 sections
  - Moving from outcomes to rubrics; both assignments and student work were sampled for intensive development of a coding scheme representing our learning outcome aspirations

Illustrative Findings from the Assignment Sample



End of Act I: Support for Assessment of General Education Hits a Roadblock

- Survey of department chairs in fall 2009:
  - General education outcome objectives are complementary to our objectives for the major (44% agree)
  - University-wide objectives for students' learning outcomes are specified, measured, and reported on a regular basis (0% agree)
- Faculty Retreat sponsored by Provost:
  - General education is not working
  - Requirements are too complicated, not well justified, out-of-date
  - Technical programs (like Engineering) can't fit them in
- Faculty Senate: create a revitalized program!

Choices: Act II

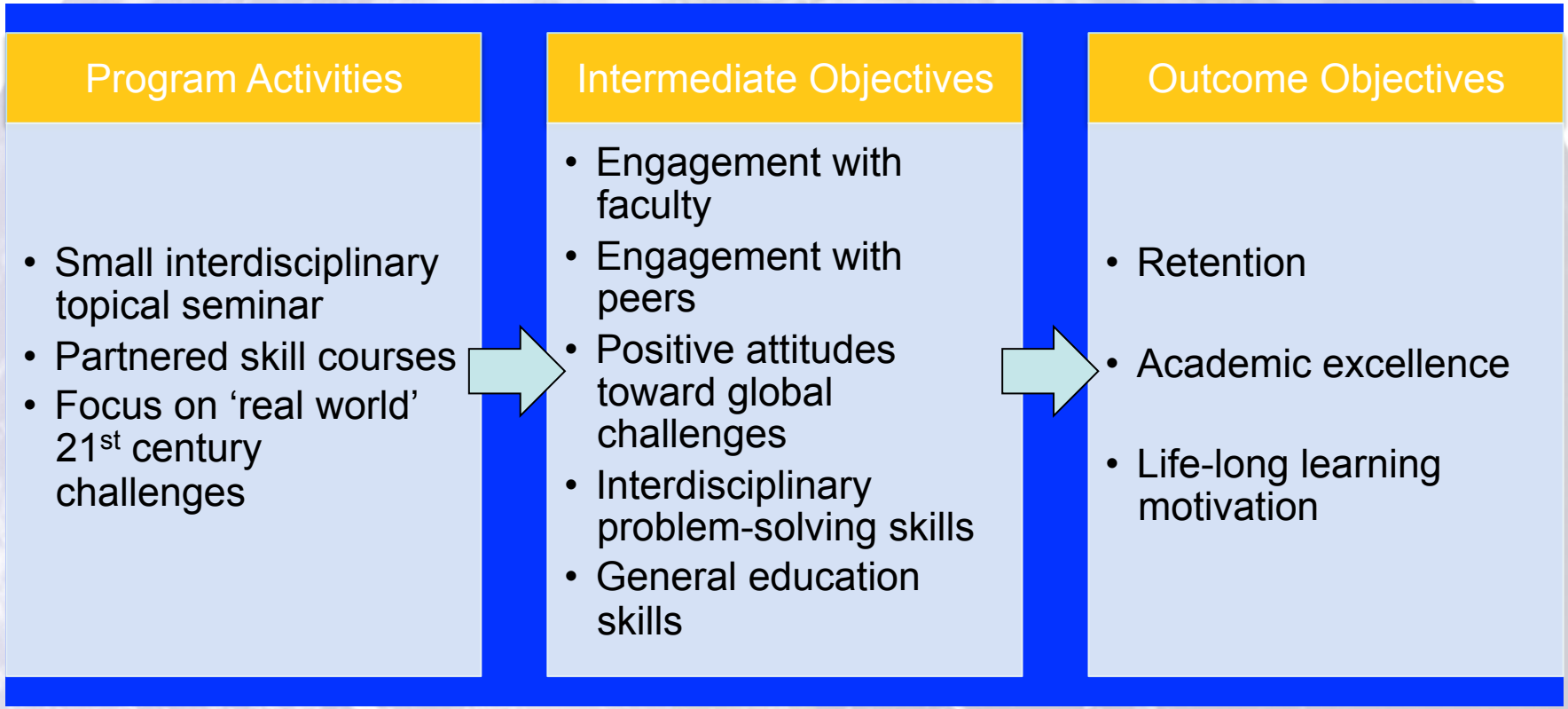
- Where to focus, what to sample, in a time of transition?
- Methods: formative vs. summative
- Aiming at a primary client for assessment results:
  - –Grand Challenge Task Force
  - –Gen Ed Committee
  - –Faculty Senate
  - –Learning Outcomes Oversight Committee
  - –RI Office of Higher Education

Choices: Act II
What to Assess for a Program in Transition?

SAGEs pick "Grand Challenge" first-year seminars as a bridge:

- Approved for existing general education
- Small (25 student maximum)
- Interdisciplinary "global challenge" themes
- Paired with "skills" courses (writing, oral communication)
- Drawing on "senior faculty" for instructors

Logic Model for Grand Challenge Initiative



Assessment Measures for Grand Challenge

Faculty Focus Groups	Artifacts	Student Survey

• (7 in yr 1; 4 in yr 2)
  • Challenges in teaching 1st-year students
  • Meaning and challenges of "interdisciplinary" teaching
  • Success in achieving learning outcome objectives
  • Role of peer mentors and difficulties with this model (year 2)
	• Course syllabi (28 in first round)
	  • learning outcomes chosen
	  • Rank of instructors
	  • Integration with paired "skills" courses
		• Year 1: 319 students in 20 of 28 sections
		• Year 2: 422 students in 27 of 30 sections
		  • Items covered
		  • Bonding to instructor and peers
		  • Appreciation of global challenges & interest in continuing to work on them
		  • Perception of improved skills in interdisciplinarity
		  • Value of connection to skills course

Assessment Measures cont'd

Student Work Samples

- assignment, rubric, student work, & cover sheet
  - "drop box" for pdfs
  - Year 1: 17/28 submitted work; 10 submitted all 4 pieces
  - Year 2: 21/30 submitted work; 14 submitted all 4 pieces

Peer Mentor Survey (year 2)

- 16 faculty mentors; 11 mentees
  - After the end of the course
  - On-line survey of:
    - Amount and nature of contact
    - Utility of the relationship
    - Problems and barriers
    - Suggestions for improvements

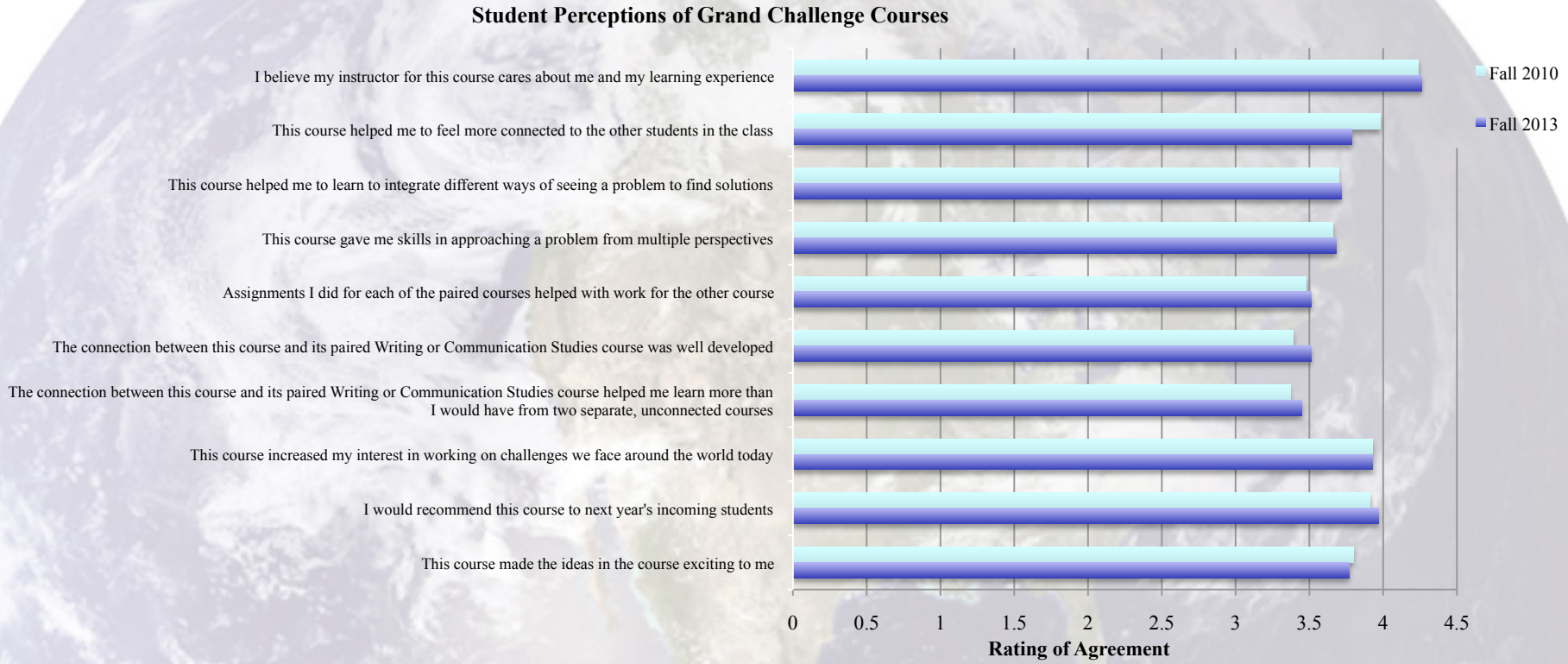
Institutional Research

- Demographic comparisons of GCH students to remaining first-year students
- Academic Excellence (GPA in subsequent semesters)
- Retention to following fall term

Choices We Made

- Stay with existing gen ed outcomes
- Emphasize formative data to guide policy formation for the new program
- First-year seminar as opportunistic
- Clients for assessment results can include the instructor community

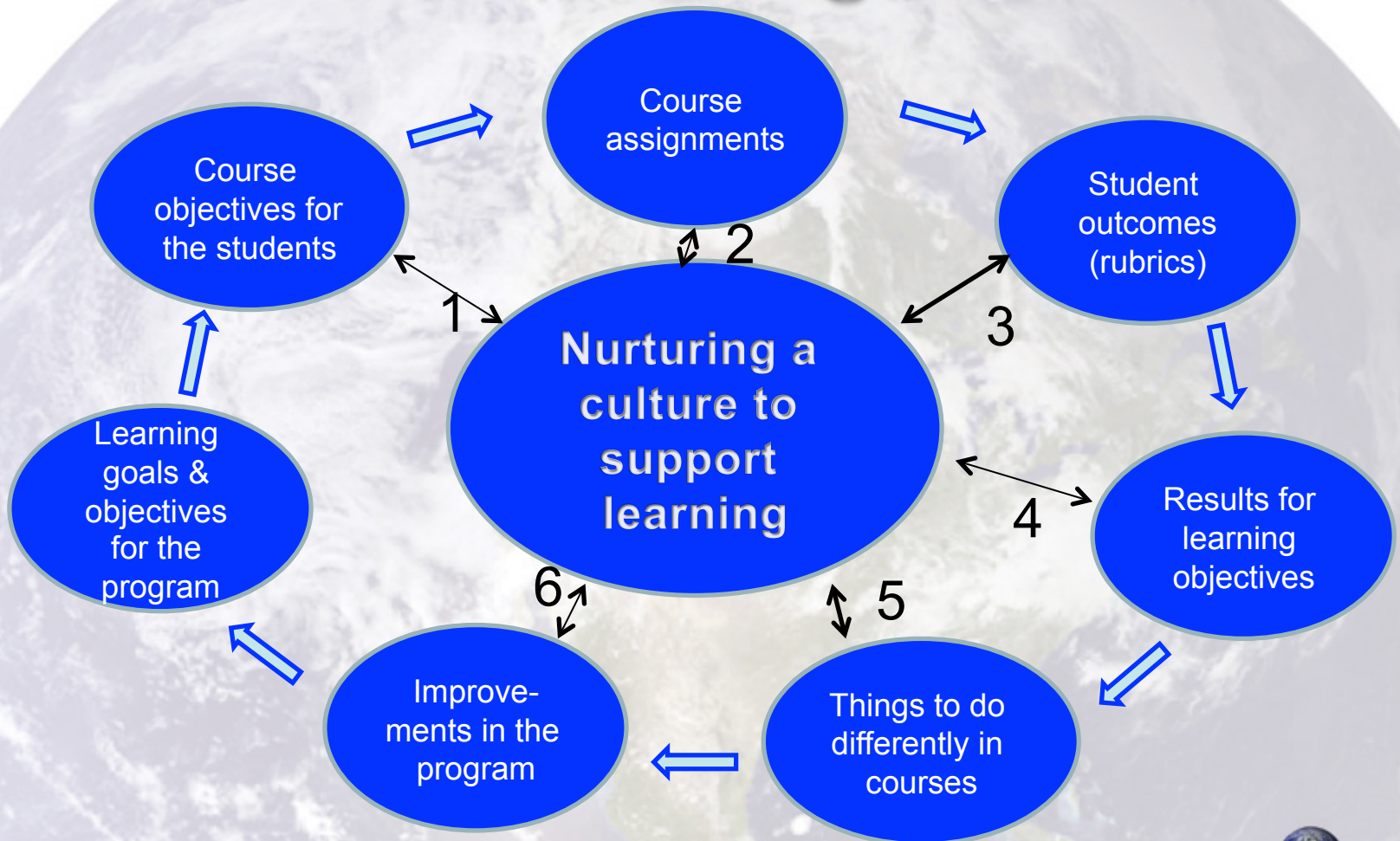
Illustrative Results: Student Survey



Using the Results over Two Years

- Choices for feedback on the Grand Challenge Assessment
  - Special Grand Challenge Task Force (policies for next year of the freshman seminar program)
  - Faculty Senate: More about implementation success than effects
- General Education Committee:
  - Copied in on the assessment reports
  - Overlapping membership informing deliberations on the new program
- Learning Outcomes Oversight Committee:
  - Is gen ed assessment happening? Direct evidence yet?

General Education Policy: It's All About Learning



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Results-Changing the Structure?

- Small topical classes for freshmen
  - Work well for bonding, chances for engagement with challenging assignments, good feedback
  - Expensive; retention and GPA were not improved
  - Departments can't sustain with senior faculty
  - First-year homogeneity has a significant down-side
  - Do not replace required pre-reqs for majors
- Linking skills courses to core knowledge courses
  - Effort to build positive collaboration prohibitive
  - Scheduling restricts access to certain majors

Conclusions-Changing the Structure?

- Letting outcomes drive the requirements
  - New shared vision on general education committee
  - Recognition of role of course application process
  - Plan for on-line interactive application with guidance, examples, clear links from chosen outcomes to assignments
- Model rubrics for gen ed outcomes
  - Workshops with key discipline representation
- "Interdisciplinary" via multi-course conversations
  - A step too far? Even team-teaching too much?

Choices: Act III
Next Steps

- Connect SAGE to the Gen Ed Committee more fully (client shift)
- Direct evidence (shift) choice considerations
  - Linked to both old and new requirements
  - Efficient to collect (collaboratively developed/adapted rubrics used by instructors)
  - Partnerships with programs that care about outcomes
- Assessment focus (shift): skills, e.g.:
  - Information Literacy
  - Writing
  - Quantitative Reasoning

Choices for Assessment: Summary

Choice	Act I	Act II	Act III
Program	Core Knowledge Areas	First-year Seminars	Skills Requirement
Client	State Higher Education Authority	Sate; Faculty Senate; Task Force; Instructors	General Education Committee; State; Accrediting Association
Outcome	Higher-order Cognitive	Implementation; Cognitive; Motivational	Skills
Sample	Stratified Random Gen Ed Courses	All Seminars in the Program	Volunteer Skills Instructors
Evidence	Direct: Late-semester assignment	Direct: grades, retention Indirect; focus groups, student survey	Direct: Rubrics applied to instructor-selected assignments