

2025-26 General Education Assessment Report - NW and ES

This report summarizes the assessment of core requirements as part of the General Education Core assessment program for academic year 2025-26. Every year we assess at least two core requirements on a rolling cycle with the goal of a complete assessment every four years. This year our assessment focused on NW – Natural World and ES – Self & Society. Additionally, we have begun the process of reviewing GE – Global Engagement based on a formal request to CCC from some faculty. This re-assessment will be a multi-step process.

Portions of this assessment were conducted by the Dean of Assessment, the Core Curriculum Committee, and faculty raters/scorers. This report was compiled by the Dean of Assessment.

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This assessment continues our efforts to meet the recommendation of NWCCU who, during the last seven-year accreditation visit, noted that our core curriculum assessment is insufficient. The recommendation had largely to do with consistency and scale (that is, we need to assess every year and we need to assess more/all of the program).

This year's core requirement assessment addresses these expectations. This is our first effort at direct and indirect assessment of student learning for the NW and ES requirements. These two elements were largely carried over from the previous general education curriculum, where they were SM (scientific method) and SO (social sciences). They had not, to our knowledge, been assessed there either.

Note: this report focuses only on the core elements. Assessment of FYEP and IHON is conducted every year; they are reported separately. Additionally, while the Culminating Experience is part of the Core, we currently expect this assessment to be completed within academic programs.

Syllabus Review → Partially Meeting Expectations

We reviewed AY 25-26 NW and ES course syllabi to evaluate clarity and consistency in the program. As has been our custom, we focused on spring courses to make the work more manageable, but discovered a critical problem for the NW requirement. NW courses are taught throughout the year, but the majority of the first-year and gen-ed focused courses are taught in the fall. We'll need to amend our strategy when NW is again up for direct assessment.

In reviewing syllabi, we look for a few things: 1) how many spring courses *named* the gen ed requirements they meet and 2) how many list the learning outcomes tied to their gen ed requirements. Additionally, we also 3) evaluate how many course syllabi connect learning outcomes to specific assignments. We do this because one of the chief criticisms of our core (and one of the assumptions that shapes our assessment and curriculum work) is that the program lacks coherence across courses that count for each requirement. Students have

difficulty understanding how they are learning outcomes, how those outcomes are aligned to course work, and how the sum total of the program results in a valuable foundational liberal arts education. That said, faculty and administrators also sometimes have trouble with this and we have seen in rare cases that some actively diminish the value of core requirements in favor of specialized major program requirements.

Importantly, while items one and two are existing standards of our gen ed program assessment, the third evaluation criteria is aspirational and not required. We hope to work with faculty to support that connecting learning outcomes to classrooms assignments/assessments. This year, syllabi were collected from college administrative offices so the response rate was much higher than usual.

There were 37 sections of **NW - Exploring the Natural World** delivered during AY 25-26. 18 of these sections were in the spring and so were included in the assessment pool.

Syllabus Submitted - Yes	% of Courses Submitted
18	100%
Lists Gen Ed(s) Met	% of Courses Listing Gen Ed(s)
13 of 18	72%
Lists Gen Ed LOs	% of Courses Listing LOs
14 of 18	77%
Links LOs to Assessment	% Linking LOs to Assessments
0 of 18	0%

56 sections of **ES - Examining Self and Society** were delivered during AY 25-26. 22 of these sections were in the spring and so were included in the assessment pool.

Syllabus Submitted - Yes	% of Courses Submitted
21	95%
Lists Gen Ed(s) Met	% of Courses Listing Gen Ed(s)
15 of 21	71%
Lists Gen Ed LOs	% of Courses Listing LOs
15 of 21	71%
Links LOs to Assessment	% Linking LOs to Assessments
3 of 21	14%

90 sections of **GE - Global Engagement** were delivered during AY 25-26. 38 of these sections were in the spring and so were included in the assessment pool.

Syllabus Submitted - Yes	% of Courses Submitted
34	89%
Lists Gen Ed(s) Met	% of Courses Listing Gen Ed(s)
24 of 34	71%
Lists Gen Ed LOs	% of Courses Listing LOs
17 of 34	50%
Links LOs to Assessment	% Linking LOs to Assessments
5 of 34	15%

Discussion and Action Items

This assessment was conducted by CCC elected members with the Dean of Assessment. We normed with sample syllabi to ensure our expectations were consistent then we rated offline before returning for a debrief and discussion.

We were surprised that so many courses still do not list the Gen Ed element met by the course. Even more fail to list the relevant Gen Ed learning outcomes met in the course. Admittedly, we are limited to this course syllabus for this review. We don't know if gen ed elements or learning outcomes are introduced and discussed in class or on Sakai, but the primary course contract--the syllabus--is not supporting students in understanding how the course serves their broader education. Importantly, a large number of these courses are taught by contingent faculty. And while the oversight is not limited to contingent faculty, it is most common in that group. This was particularly true in our review of ES. This common concern points to an opportunity for mentoring and support from the general education program (via CCC and the Dean of the Core) as well as department/program chairs and colleagues who should be helping new visiting faculty meet basic standards.

Similarly, while we don't require it, only a few courses make an effort to help student see how course activities and assignments align to core learning outcomes. Again, this discussion may happen in the course or on individual assignment prompts, or it may not happen at all, which leaves students to discern on their own how the work they do in the course meets specific core learning goals. Based on anecdotal evidence we feel the latter is quite common--many faculty still think of their courses as departmental aligned rather than as part of the core curriculum.

Importantly, we all agreed, these appear to be great courses and our direct evidence suggests students are learning quite a lot. We see inventive and creative work. We see student-focused activities with plenty of time for practice and application. In many cases there appears to be a great deal of effort made to create assignments that are well-suited to gen ed learning.

However, in some cases, particularly 300-level courses or courses that carry pre-requisites, we worry the course content is not always so intentionally focused on introductory and general knowledge. Of course, it doesn't always need to be as students can choose more advanced offerings if they feel academically ready and/or if the topic appeals to them.

Related to this, we did identify some concern in NW courses that carry pre-requisites. This question comes up in the direct assessment as well. If a course is the second in a fixed sequence and the earlier course carries the gen ed element, do we need this second course to do so as well? Is this course "gen ed" if it requires particular knowledge from the previous course? One rationale has been if a student takes courses as a transfer student they may place into a later course in a sequence. This is something we can investigate, but generally students will have received gen ed transfer credit for the earlier courses. It was proposed to simply remove the core elements from "second courses" in sequenced curricula.

Finally, a note about Global Engagement. We undertook this syllabus evaluation as part of a review requested by faculty who are concerned that such a large number of courses count for this requirement. 90 sections spread across all three terms is far more than needed to meet the needs of the requirement. However, we know these courses meet other needs as well—major, minor, and elective. Global Engagement is a central component of the PLU mission and critical to the holistic preparation of our students. The greater concern is the tremendous breadth of courses offered to meet the requirement. The faculty who submitted their concerns note that it has become unclear what we mean when we say "global" as students can meet the requirement in so many different ways. And this idea was reflected in our review—it would be difficult to precisely define what PLU means by global engagement.

Next steps for syllabi and document review, more generally:

- Priority #1: Ensure that gen ed elements and learning outcomes are present on 100% of gen ed course syllabi.
- Communicate with gen ed faculty more effectively in general; share data and this assessment, support effective gen teaching, and begin discussing strategies for connecting learning outcomes to courses activities in a way that students can understand (and value).
- Collect and review *all* course syllabi (the full academic year, not spring only) for the expected requirements.
- Request that faculty remove old gen ed core elements from courses. There are no active students completing this program.
- Expand the Global Engagement syllabus review to determine thematic coherence; potentially use AI to examine the larger data set to evaluate the scope and coherence of this requirement.

Core Requirement Direct Assessment → Meeting Expectations

Every year we conduct direct assessment of two core requirements using a faculty-led rubric-based analysis. Faculty scorers are recruited from those who teach the requirement. They participate in a four-hour assessment workshop (led by the Dean of Assessment) that includes—goal setting, norming and rubric testing, independent scoring, and discussion.

The Natural World (NW) assessment was conducted on Tuesday, June 2 2026. The Exploring Self and Society (ES) assessment was conducted on Wednesday, June 3 2026. Two members of the Core Curriculum Committee were present for both workshops. Raters were paid \$50/hour for this work.

The purpose of this assessment was to evaluate student learning for each requirement. Because we are only able to conduct a direct assessment of each requirement on a four-year cycle, all learning outcomes are evaluated.

Engaging the Natural World (4): Students will learn methods to develop and test theories and understandings of the physical and natural phenomena that shape our world. A lab, field experience, or applied component is required.

- Students will formulate hypotheses or meaningful questions based on their study of the physical and biological world.
- Students will draw logical conclusions from data gathered by experiment, observation, and/or from relevant sources.

Examining Self and Society (4): Students will explore methods and models for understanding human behavior within a variety of cultural, social, or structural contexts, both contemporary and historical.

- Students will analyze the social, political, and economic institutions or systems that shape human behavior.
- Students will draw conclusions about human behavior in relation to social, structural, or group contexts.

In preparation for the meeting, the Dean of Assessment held an “opening the loop” meeting for each requirement (November 2025). All faculty teaching NW and ES courses in AY 25-26 were invited to attend. Seven NW instructors and two Core Curriculum Members attended the NW meeting. Eight ES instructors and two Core Curriculum Members attended the ES meeting. The conversation focused on a few key areas: 1) how do you interpret the required learning outcomes for your course; 2) how do you teach the LOs and what assignments do you use to assess them; and 3) what are your own standards to understand when an assignment exceeds, meets, or approaches expectations.

From this conversation, the Dean of Assessment developed rubrics to use in the end of year assessment (see [the NW rubric here](#) and [the ES rubric here](#)). Instructors were invited to review the rubric a week or so before the workshop. The direct assessment workshop began with a lengthy conversation about the rubric, leading to several small scale revisions to be applied during the scoring session. Further revisions would be applied later.

NW Direct Assessment

14 of the 18 total spring sections of NW submitted artifacts (77%). 60 samples were selected; this is 11% of the total number of students who completed an NW course in the spring. Note that some artifacts were aligned to only one of the learning outcomes. As such the relevant *n* is listed in the table below.

All NW courses are taught at the 100- or 200-levels so we do not see the problem of advanced courses counting for general education. However, NW is the requirement that most commonly introduces the problem of sequenced courses carrying redundant core elements (i.e., in a fixed two courses sequence both courses carry the same element).

Following rubric norming using sample artifacts, readers were assigned to one of two tables. Each table was assigned approximately 50% of the total sample. Readers were asked to score each artifact using the rubric, assigning a score of 0-4 for each LO, reflecting our common beginning, approaching, meeting, exceeding expectations framework. A score of “0” could be assigned if the faculty member felt the student did not show any capacity to meet the LO. However, we determined this was most commonly a result of a misalignment between the assessment and the learning goals. This is based on how they faculty member write the assignments OR on the fact they selected an assignment that was ill-suited to the assessment. As one rater said it—“when students are able to show their learning, the usually do.” Raters were allowed to use half scores if they wished (e.g., 2.5) to facilitate more nuance in scoring, but many preferred to round up or down. Each project/artifact was scored twice (once by two different raters).

	Mean	Median	Mode	St. Dev	Interrater	% Achieving	% Excelling
Learning Outcome 1 (n=48)	2.53	2.5	3	.468	96%	50%	2%
Learning Outcome 2 (n=54)	2.47	2.50	3	.512	98%	65%	4%

Scores are lower than we’d like for NW. However, if we think of 2.5 as skewed toward 3 (in the positive half of a 4-point scale, then our students are likely doing satisfactory work. But many did not meet our threshold for meeting expectations.

The assessment reveals there may be many reasons for this scoring pattern in our assessment, including the assignment prompts and how they are written, the assignments selected for submissions, some misaligned between the rubric and the LOs themselves, and larger philosophical commitments about the learning meant to be reflected in these LOs. Given the many complexities surrounding this new assessment process, we all felt the work was satisfactory. But there is clear room for growth in our process to ensure faculty know how to solicit/share the students best work as a demonstration of learning in the courses.

ES Direct Assessment

15 of the 22 total spring sections of ES submitted artifacts (68%). 62 samples were selected, or nearly 15% of the total number of students who completed an ES course in the spring. Note that some artifacts were aligned to only one of the learning outcomes. As such the relevant *n* is listed in the table below.

Roughly 30% of the ES courses for the spring were at the 300-level and so scores below are disaggregated.

Following rubric norming using sample artifacts, readers were assigned to one of two tables. Each table was assigned approximately 50% of the total sample. Readers were asked to score each artifact using the rubric, assigning a score of 0-4 for each LO, reflecting our common beginning, approaching, meeting, exceeding expectations framework. A score of “0” could be assigned if the faculty member felt the student did not show any capacity to meet the LO. However, we determined this was most commonly a result of a misalignment between the assessment and the learning goals. This is based on how they faculty member write the assignments OR on the fact they selected an assignment that was ill-suited to the assessment. As one rater said it—“when students are able to show their learning, they usually do.” Raters were allowed to use half scores if they wished (e.g., 2.5) to facilitate more nuance in scoring, but many preferred to round up or down. Each project/artifact was scored twice (once by two different raters).

	Mean	Median	Mode	St. Dev	Interrater	% Achieving	% Excelling
Learning Outcome 1 (n=52)	2.69	2.63	3	.792	94%	70%	20%
Learning Outcome 2 (n=52)	2.62	2.50	3	.704	92%	65%	15%

	Mean	100/200 Mean n=43	300 Mean n=9
Learning Outcome 1 (n=52)	2.69	2.82	2.37
Learning Outcome 2 (n=52)	2.62	2.73	2.33

Scores for ES were also satisfactory for this rating group. While the mean is below our “meeting expectations” benchmark, we generally felt the students are meeting the goals that underwrite the ES requirement. A majority of students sampled were enrolled in a 100- or 200-level ES course. The scores for this group are close to a mean of “3” which represents our “meeting standards” threshold. Student artifacts from 300-level courses show lower scores. This has been true in other recent core assessments as well—GE and IT most notably—and points to an opportunity to either limit the number of gen ed courses that count for ES, support faculty in

delivering ES courses for less-prepared students, or advise more carefully to ensure students are selecting courses that are most appropriate for their abilities and interests.

Again, we feel students are doing quite well, particularly when the assignment selected by the faculty allowed them to show off their abilities 1) at length, or 2) in scaffolded learning contexts (e.g., multiple assignments, multiple revisions, etc.).

Like NW, this is the first time we are using this rubric and, while the interrater consistency was high, we noted many problems with how the rubric reflects the core learning outcomes. These are described below.

Discussion and Action Items

This process continues to be productive for instructors who attend. The discussions that followed each scoring session were thoughtful and wide-ranging, including observations about student work, course design, and the challenges of assessing our gen ed program--these two elements and all elements. The conversation is summarized below, but a few things are worth calling out specifically:

General Notes

One: The level of participation is improving in some ways but not others. More faculty submitted artifacts than ever before. 77% of NW and 68% of ES. That is double what we were seeing when we began this work several years ago. A clear sign of improvement. However, we still only had nine or ten raters volunteer for a paid faculty development workshop. This is in keeping with recent trends around faculty development--very strong engagement by those in attendance, but poor attendance overall. This is particularly discouraging in an environment where faculty often lament how few opportunities they have for paid PD.

Two: The 4-point scale is effective as a "temperature check" to determine if students have crossed a particular learning threshold, though some raters felt it might sacrifice nuance compared to a 6-point scale.

Three: The sections that did not submit materials for this assessment were largely taught by non-tenure line visiting faculty who may have missed requests or not familiar with our assessment processes. Importantly, a large number of our gen ed courses are taught by these faculty members. It will be important in the future to ensure

Natural World Notes

Rubric and Scoring Concerns

- Raters identified significant issues with the rubric levels. "Beginning" was viewed as too lenient, while there is a perceived "big jump" between "Approaching" and "Meeting." This is a problem in the design of the rubric that can be adjusted for next time.
- Related, the "Exceeding" category is seen as effectively unattainable for 100/200-level courses by design, causing it to be viewed as "extra work" rather than a demonstration

of core mastery. Some raters described this as intentional--they felt that students at this level should only be able to "meet" standard in most circumstances.

- For LO1, the rubric asks quite a bit more than the LO itself. Moving beyond hypothesis writing to deeper inquiry is perhaps an unfair requirement and suggests a multi-course sequence instead of a single NW course. That we focused our direct assessment on spring semester (often the second course in the sequence) it is a little surprising that students didn't do better on the whole. As such, the details of this LO on the rubric need to be reviewed.

Assessment Tool and Assignment Design

- There was a concern that highly guided assignments (e.g., worksheets where students fill in blanks related to reading and experimentation) do not allow students to demonstrate independent mastery of learning objectives, at least not for a reading audience from outside the course.
- Many faculty submitted assignments that were limited in scope, making it difficult for students to showcase the depth or breadth required to meet higher scoring criteria. Several assignments didn't seem aligned to the LOs at all--at least not in how they appeared in the submitted artifacts. We will connect directly with these faculty and better share best practices for future assessments.

Pedagogical and Curricular Alignment

- There is no uniform understanding of what constitutes a "hypothesis" across departments. While some variance is accepted (and good!), it complicates assessment and makes it difficult for us to understand student achievement at a high level.
- Questions arose regarding whether these courses—which are often major-aligned rather than purpose-built for Gen Ed—are truly accessible to all students. Do they need to be accessible to be Gen Ed courses? In many cases, these are required courses for degree programs. Students must complete them anyway. In the case of non-STEM students (taking these courses for general education credit) this may be an advising problem—ensuring students register for courses that are suitable for their ability and interest.
- There is a need for greater emphasis on teaching and scaffolding question-asking skills, particularly for introductory courses where students may not yet be designing original experiments.

Self & Society Notes

Assignment Design and Artifact Quality:

- Raters noted that many submitted artifacts—specifically diagrams, short-answer responses, and casual conversation notes—were insufficient to demonstrate student mastery of the Learning Outcomes (LOs). Raters emphasized the need to clarify expectations for what constitutes the "best, most invested" evidence of student learning.
- Highly guided assignments (e.g., "fill-in-the-blank" worksheets) often restricted students from demonstrating independent mastery. Conversely, very scaffolded assignments that asked students to do more generally resulted in higher, more nuanced demonstrations of learning.

Learning Outcomes and Rubric Limitations:

- The current LOs overlap significantly, making them difficult to distinguish during assessment. There is an urgent need to clearly define key terms like "systems" and "institutions" in such a way that they are inclusive of all programs/courses that deliver this requirement.
- Related, the current rubric and LOs are perceived as heavily skewed toward the social sciences, potentially alienating other disciplines (e.g., psychology) that were traditionally part of the older "SO" requirement. This is attributed to the legacy of past curriculum design rather than current intent.

Assessment Scope and Authenticity:

- A single artifact provides a limited view of the broader learning occurring in a course. Raters questioned if they should assume student knowledge exists beyond what is captured in the submitted sample. There was interest in shifting toward more authentic, embedded assessment methods, such as portfolios or course-embedded assessments, to capture a more complete picture of student learning.

Pedagogical and Institutional Challenges:

- As in past assessments, ES scores show higher performance in 100/200-level classes. Not much can be taken from this based on the imbalanced sample size and there are a number of reasons this might happen (e.g., more difficult assignments at 300 level, assignments that are more discipline-aligned). But we do continue to wonder about the suitability of 300-level courses for general education on a larger scale. A recurring concern has been whether courses designed primarily for a major can effectively serve general education goals. Faculty often view courses through a departmental lens, leading to a potential disconnect between general education objectives and course curricula. That said, we have evidence that non-specialist students can do very well in advanced general education courses. So, the solution is somewhere in the middle—reduce the number of 300-level general education courses with emphasis on those that serve the general education population AND devise advising materials to help students make the best choice for them.
- Raters raised questions about the impact of "Running Start" students on assessment data, specifically whether their prior preparation leads to higher performance and how that skews our understanding of what is actually learned in our courses.

Action Items:

1. **Norming and Training.** Implement additional training measures to support faculty teaching general education courses. Start with a pre-conference workshop focused on Gen Ed assessment and assignment design, including "practice norming" sessions where faculty score student work to refine their assignments. This work should be designed to help faculty 1) better align their courses to general education goals; 2) support faculty in selecting artifacts that reflect student learning for each learning outcome; 3) reflect on the suitability of their current course (or current course design) for the general education program.
2. **Increased Communication.** At a minimum, distribute the core rubrics in August with opportunities for feedback, and ideally schedule visits to College meetings to help faculty—particularly contingent faculty—understand assessment expectations and workshop their prompts. We have rubrics for ES, GE, IT, NW, QR, and VW. CX is scheduled for AY 26-27, as is RL (the last time RL was assessed we focused exclusively on the old RC courses).
3. **Strategic Clarification.** Clarify the goal of the assessment to help instructors decide between designing a single "perfect" assignment that hits all LOs versus submitting multiple assignments over the term. Consider how we might support more authentic, longitudinal assessments (and how we might assess them without vastly adding to workload).
4. **Guidance Re: Assignment Selection.** Distribute a "Best Practices" guide for assignment selection. Explicitly define what constitutes "best, most invested" evidence of student learning, and provide examples of assignments (e.g., scaffolded projects vs. short-answer worksheets) that reliably allow students to demonstrate mastery.
5. **Targeted Outreach to Contingent Faculty and Grow Participation.** Current participation is skewed toward tenure-line faculty, despite the fact that many Core courses are taught by contingent faculty. Schedule visits to College meetings specifically to share assessment data, explain expectations, and assist visiting or contingent faculty in mapping their course prompts to the LOs.
6. **NW-specific Suggestions.**
 - a. Expand how we think about teaching LO1: How do instructors teach hypothesis writing/question posing? How do they scaffold the skill in the course? In an intro course students sometimes don't write original hypotheses, but they do pose questions based on their learning in the course. We need instructors to be thinking about the difference and how they assess what students have learned.
 - b. The departments of natural sciences need to talk about LO2. Should students have to show some detail/explanation/depth? The form of the assessments often limited how much they could do this. For example, a basic test question can show a conclusion, but doesn't show how they arrived there. Students need to be able to explain how they arrived at the conclusion; they need to be able to show they can do it (which means they need to be carefully taught how to do it in class).
7. **ES-specific Suggestions.**
 - a. Determine a strategy to refine/revise the ES Learning Outcomes. Raters consistently noted confusing overlap. For the purpose of the assessment, we distinguished LO 1 as being focused on the methodical analysis of social, political, or economic concepts/systems; whereas LOs is focused on the implications for human behavior, experience, and structural/group relationships.
 - b. Review the outcome and rubric language to ensure it does not alienate fields like Psychology or other social sciences.