Supporting the General Education Program for Distance and Adult Students

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Abstract

How do you blend General Education competencies (i.e. communication, ethical/logical/mathematical reasoning) across an institution and curriculum? Kaplan University's General Education program integrates and assesses student proficiency in General Education disciplines across all undergraduate programs. The data is used to inform curricular improvements in a continuous process for maximizing student learning.

Introduction

Kaplan University (KU) is an institution of higher education within the private, on-line sector. KU is accredited by the Higher Learning Commission and a member of the North Central Association of Colleges and Schools to deliver online and on-ground certificates, associates, bachelor, master's degrees, and the Juris Doctor degree. KU provides an education that prepares students for successful careers, and to become active members of their communities.

While the majority of KU students enroll in completely online degrees, others take blended or completely on-ground programs at our 11 campuses and five learning centers. KU offers degrees in business, communication, education, health sciences, human services, information technology, legal studies, nursing, psychology, public safety, and more. The flexibility of KU's programs and delivery attract a largely non-traditional student body.

KU currently serves approximately 50,000 students, with sixty-three percent over 30 years of age. A significant majority of KU students exhibit traits identified as challenges to student success, with an average of three risk factors based on the National Center on Education Statistics (NCES) (Kaplan University, 2012), including enrollment choices, academic preparation, aptitude and college readiness, family and peer support, motivation to learn, and demographics. Most are employed and are seeking to update their knowledge and skills to achieve promotion within their field or pursue better paying careers outside their current employment field.

General Education Literacy at Kaplan University

In higher education it is difficult to help students attain the skills needed in an increasingly complex and global workforce. While specific knowledge and skills are important to prepare students to be successful in their chosen career, general education helps students develop critical thinking, reasoning, and writing skills that are foundational and transferable across all careers. General Education competencies are important to foster a well-rounded individual and the skills learned are necessary for students in all majors and in all career paths. In fact, Arum and Roksa (2011) found that liberal arts majors have significantly higher gains in these skills

than students in other majors.

General education is more than a disparate, disconnected set of courses. It allows each discipline to show its own way of understanding the world while at the same time encouraging interdisciplinary perspectives to be examined. Kaplan University is committed to ensuring their students gain competency in general education outcomes. "The mission of the Kaplan University General Education program is to support the academic, social, personal, and professional development of learners throughout their engagement with the University" (Kaplan University, 2012). This allows students to gain knowledge in nine areas of literacy: Arts and Humanities, Communications, Critical Thinking, Ethics, Mathematics, Research and Information, Science, and Technology.

At Kaplan University this mission is met in two ways. First, general education is taught through six courses within the bachelor's degree programs. This core set of courses allows students to take courses in Communications (2 courses), mathematics, science, social science and the arts and humanities. These are interdisciplinary courses designed to introduce students to the basic concepts, terminology, and methodology of each area. Furthermore, each course offered at Kaplan University includes a writing assignment and the use of technology, reinforcing the communications and technology literacies. Each course also includes a unit of study based on one of the remaining seven literacies. For example, a business course would have several business-specific course outcomes, a communication GEL, and an mathematics GEL. This has become the General Education Literacy or GEL program. What is unique about Kaplan University's inclusion of GELs in all undergraduate coursework is that this step raises the teaching and learning of these skills to a conscious level, for both students and faculty.

Designing and Assessing GELs

Each KU program comprises a series of program outcomes that identify the major knowledge, skills, and attitudes employers expect of program graduates. Each program is divided into a series of courses which prepare students for employment in the field by providing preparation, practice, and opportunities to show mastery of the program outcomes. Each course has a number of outcomes that support and map to program level outcomes. Faculty members assess student mastery of each course outcome through Course Learning Assessments (CLA), which are mapped to program outcomes. In addition to the CLAs and program outcomes, GELs are also assessed which allow students, faculty, and programs administrators to see how the student progresses throughout their entire program.

Each GEL area has a committee comprising of faculty and academic staff who are subject matter experts from across the university. Each of the GEL committees is responsible for writing the course outcomes and rubrics that are tied to each specific literacy. In addition the GEL Committees also review and approve the manner in which the outcome is taught in each course in which it is implemented, by evaluating all GEL-specific assignments used within the courses. Committees also develop sample units, sample assignments, and faculty development materials as a resource for course developers and subject matter experts who are implementing the outcome in each course.

Each assignment in each GEL area is evaluated with a rubric using the following scale:

0	No Progress
1	Emergent
2	Introductory
3	Practiced
4	Proficient
5	Mastery
9	N/A

The data from the GELs are designed to measure student learning outcomes at the course and program levels. The purpose is to determine if students are improving in their knowledge of General Education Literacy outcomes. To assess this, KU regularly studies the scores from students to compare average GEL scores from lower level courses—100 and 200 level with upper level courses—300 and 400. Increased GEL scores from

lower to upper level courses would be an indicator of improved knowledge.

Data Collection and Analysis

The GEL data is collected at the student level within each course in which a GEL is incorporated. This data links to a database located on one of the Universities servers. A series of reports were developed through SAS (Statistical Analysis System) Web Report Studio. These reports allow for multiple comparisons of GEL scores based on frequencies, percentages, and averages. For example, data can be reported as a frequency or percentage of students that obtain a score of 1—Emergent through 5—Mastery for any of the GEL's within a specific course. Data can also be reported as an average on the five point scale for comparisons between course-levels, quarters, and schools to name a few.

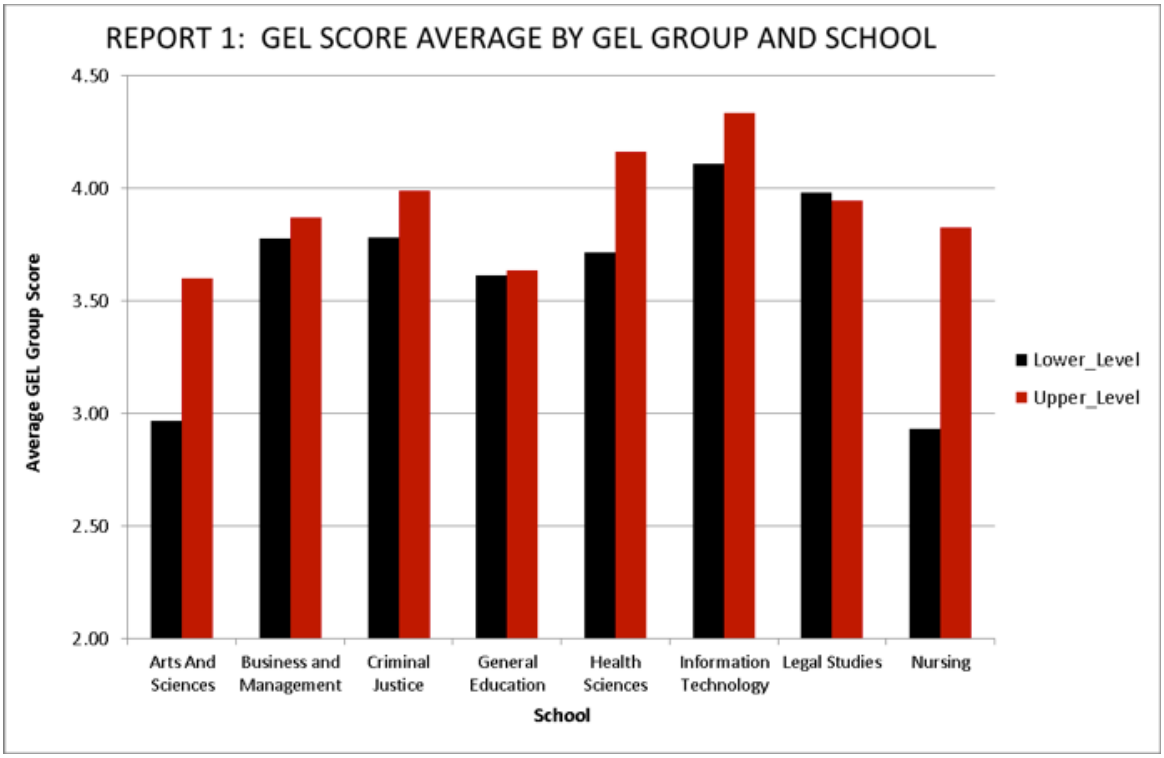
In all nine different reports were developed along with a guide to assist in the evaluation of General Education Literacy. A sample of the reports along with a description of the types of information they provide is as follows:

- Report_1: GEL Score Summary by GEL Group
  - GEL group averages by course level, school, and term
- Report_4: GEL score trends over course-levels
  - GEL group or specific averages and frequencies by course-level over terms
- Report_5: GEL score comparison by term
  - GEL group or specific averages and frequencies over two terms or sets of terms for statistical significance using z tests. Also provides counts and graphs of data.
- Report_8: GEL scores by school and course
  - GEL averages for school or course by campus, course modality, or student type
- Report_9: GEL distribution
  - GEL group or specific averages and frequencies by list of courses being assessed

A sample of report 1 is provided below. As shown in the chart, the comparison is for GEL group averages by school between lower-level (100 & 200 level) and upper-level (300 & 400 level) courses. The report is informative indicating that GEL group averages are higher for upper-level courses compared to lower-level courses for nearly all schools.

In our analysis of this data, we commonly use the three-year moving average to control for random fluctuations in the data that may exist in year-to-year comparisons. This method increases the stability of the data and shows that overall, students increase in General Education Literacy as they progress through their program of study.

Figure 1:



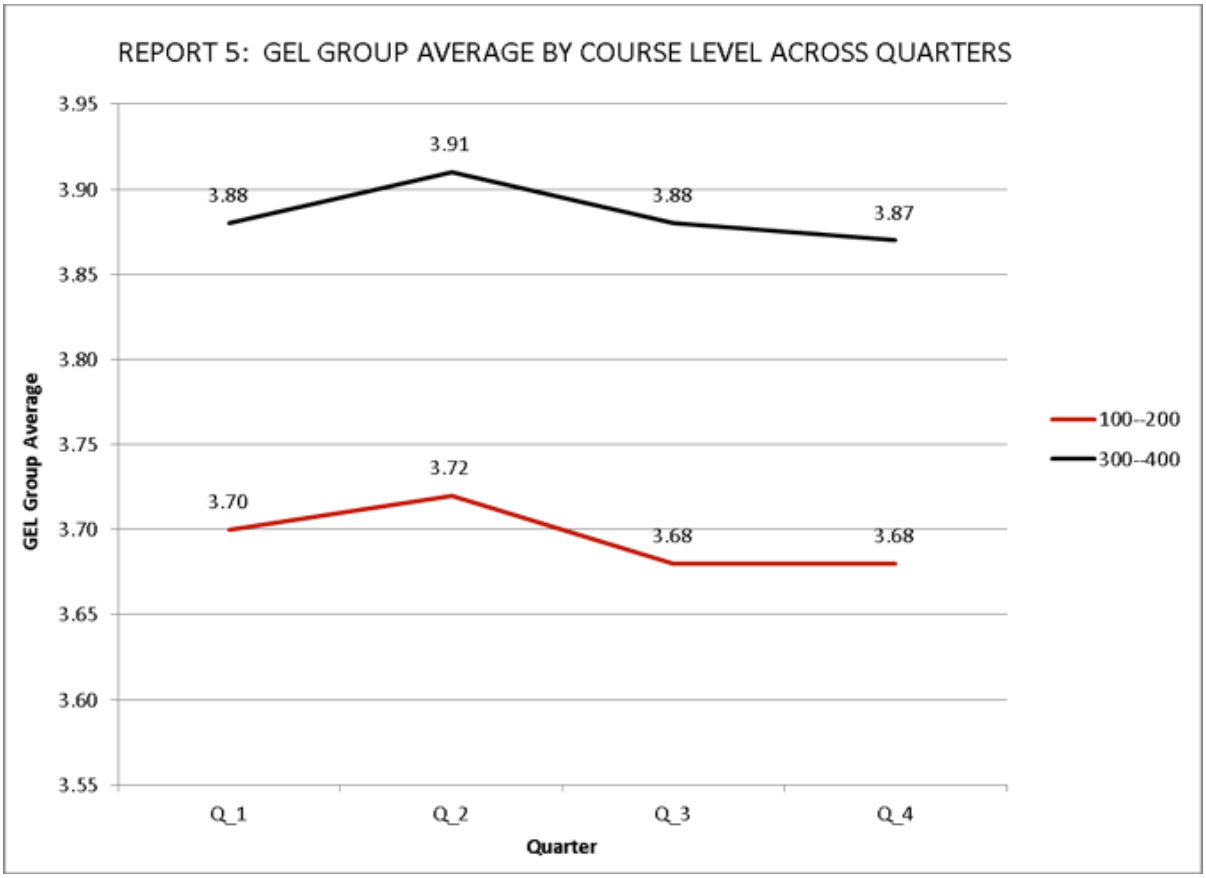
A sample of report 5 is shown in the Figure 2, below. This report provides the GEL group averages by course level and term. The statistical comparison is across term within course level. That is, is the average GEL score statistically different from one term to the next within each course level?

In the chart below, we combined a set of terms into quarter averages in which to make comparisons. This report allows for this type of comparison by selecting multiple terms and aggregating the averages into a single average than can be used as a quarter average.

Not only is this report useful for determining statistical changes over terms and quarters but it provides empirical evidence for the stability of the GEL scores. In both lower and upper-level courses, the scores over the four quarters only change by a maximum value of 1%. This indicates that students are performing at a relatively constant rate in General Education Literacy across terms and course levels.

Although the percentage change in the averages across terms is minor, the z tests show these changes as being statistically significant. The reason for this is the large sample sizes. Typically we are dealing with over 10,000 students thus even slight changes in the averages result in significant differences. Our interpretation of these scores is related to their stability over time and within course-levels and not so much on significance of the change scores.

Figure 2:



Although there are several other reports in the SAS Web Report Studio that could be use, we believe these two are the most important for evaluating the General Education Literacy program at Kaplan University.

Continuous Curriculum Improvement

At KU, outcome data is collected and analyzed at both the program and course level. During course level analysis, curriculum experts and faculty subject matter experts collaborate to review the CLA and GEL data, in combination with other data, to make instructional decisions.

By employing a research-based instructional design heurist approach known as ADDIE (i.e. **A**nalysis, **D**esign, **D**evelopment, **I**mplementation, **E**valuation), we are able use outcome data for continuous improvement in a systematic and systemic way. Each of the five phases in ADDIE is composed of data-driven processes which are both interrelated and iterative. The steps are interrelated in that the data generated in each process is the basis for the choices in future steps.

In the analysis phase, all outcome data is reviewed with faculty and curriculum experts to determine what areas students are successful in and where they are struggling. Based on this analysis, both programs and courses are revised to capitalize on best practices to better support our students' learning. When applied systematically and strategically, the results of using this heuristic approach are better courseware and learning.

Summary

KU's GEL program provides both a systemic and systematic process for designing and measuring general education literacies across all undergraduate courses and programs. The expectation that students consciously practice and improve these skills throughout their college career, with repeated practice throughout their program, has shown that student learning is increasing within the literacies.

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