

# CTL Bulletin

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A bi-weekly information sheet by the Center for Teaching and Learning

## Latest Findings: General Ed Assessment Results

How does the academic performance of Northeastern's students compare with other students at peer institutions? Are we meeting our general education goals through the instruction we provide our students? Is there a change in the writing abilities of students from the time they enter to the time they complete their general education requirements? Where should we as faculty put our focus when we teach general education courses?

These are just some of the questions faculty want to know. The General Education Committee attempted to answer these by implementing the new General Education Assessment Plan during the 2004-2005 academic year. As you may remember, the plan included several methods of assessing students' academic performance in general education. Among these were use of a standardized test, the Academic Profile, and an embedded form of assessment that took actual products of student work and utilized a faculty panel to assess these using general education rubrics.

In this issue, Angeles Eames, Associate Director of the Center for Teaching and Learning, presents a few of the findings from the standardized testing and discusses some implications for teaching and learning. During the coming weeks, you will be hearing more about the complete results at Dean's Council meetings and at faculty assemblies.

The Academic Profile Test administered during the Spring semester assessed students' skills and abilities in the following areas:

- Critical Thinking
- Reading
- Writing
- Mathematics

and provided context based subscores in the areas of:

- Humanities
- Social Sciences
- Natural Sciences

as well as a total score. A total of 279 completed test forms were scored. The test was administered to students in upper level classes, students who had completed most if not all of their general education requirements.

The possible total score range was 400 to 500 pts. The mean total score for Northeastern students was 440; the mean total score of students in our peer institutions (Masters, Comprehensive, I & II) was 444. However, when you take into account the standard deviations, we find that for practical purposes, there are no differences in scores between the two groups.

In examining various skills dimensions, scores were grouped into proficiency classifications. The three proficiency classifications were: "Proficient," "Marginal," and "Not Proficient."

In the case of reading and critical thinking skills, 56% of NEIU students were proficient at level 1. At level one a student can (a) recognize factual material explicitly presented in a reading passage and (b) understand the meaning of particular words or phrases in the context of a reading passage.

Another 27% were proficient at level two. In addition to discerning the items for level one, level two students can (a) synthesize material from different sections of a passage, (b) recognize valid inferences derived from material in the passage, (c) identify accurate summaries of a passage, (d) understand and interpret figurative language, and (d) discern the main idea, purpose or focus of a passage or a significant portion of the passage.

Only 3% of NEIU students tested were proficient at reading/critical thinking level three. At level three, a student can (a) evaluate competing causal explanations, (b) evaluate hypotheses for consistency with known facts, (c) determine the relevance of information for evaluating an argument or conclusion, (d) determine whether an artistic interpretation is supported by evidence contained in the work, (e) recognize the salient features or themes in a work of art and (f) evaluate the appropriateness of procedures for investigating a question of causation.

Testing programs in high school and in the first few years of college assess students' knowledge of facts. Tests are often multiple-choice or short answer. The goal is for students to learn fundamental facts on which they can build their level of knowledge and understanding. Not surprisingly then, this is the area where NEIU students performed best relative to the other areas tested. Understanding the meaning of particular words or phrases in the context of a reading passage is a skill that improves with more directed or focused reading and analysis of sentence and paragraph structures. One might reasonably expect then that these skills would show improvement as students move from their freshman year to their senior year and as more reading is assigned.

The Boyer Commission's report, *Reinventing Undergraduate Education*, notes that "Many students graduate having accumulated whatever number of courses is required, but still lacking a coherent body of knowledge or any inkling as to how one sort of information might relate to others." The challenge nationally and at NEIU is to find ways to build the success of students at level one and to select instructional practices and programs that further develop students' abilities in synthesis, summary, and critical thinking.

To learn more about the General Education Assessment Results, please be sure to attend one of the upcoming college or university faculty meetings when you see it on the agenda. To learn more about how to select instructional practices that maximize students' reading and critical thinking abilities, contact the Center for Teaching and Learning.

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