Some Lessons to be Learned from a Decade of General Education Outcomes Assessment with the ACT COMP Measures¹

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ABSTRACT: In the last decade, the ACT COMP Composite Exam and Objective Test have been the most frequently used standardized measures of cognitive general education outcomes. This article reviews the literature addressing uses of the COMP measures in order to evaluate valid and reliable uses of the COMP measures. It concludes that worthwhile evaluations of uses of the COMP measures can only take place in well-crafted general education program evaluations, and that many reported general education program evaluations incorporate both untenable assumptions and flawed practices. The article concludes with suggestions for improving general education program evaluations.

The period from 1980–1990, the so-called “assessment decade” in higher education (Banta, 1988b) has been characterized by increasing emphasis on assessment of learning outcomes at post secondary institutions (Paulson, 1990). One major goal of most such assessment efforts is to define and measure general education outcomes in the cognitive domain.

The American College Testing College Outcome Measures Program (ACT COMP) has published two of the most frequently used measures of cognitive general education outcomes. One of them, the Composite Exam, requires multiple-choice, written, and oral-audiotaped responses. It takes about four hours to administer. The second, the Objective Test, is a proxy for the Composite Exam and requires only

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multiple choice responses. It takes about two and one-half hours to administer.

These two ACT COMP measures are important for 4 reasons:

1. They are the first commercially developed, nationally standardized measures designed to assess the cognitive outcomes of general education programs.
2. They have been administered at more than 450 post-secondary institutions and described in about 80 available reports.
3. They have been an important aspect of the ongoing discussion about what general education is and how it should be evaluated.
4. Their degree of reliable and valid use has a large impact on the quality of many general education evaluations.

This paper evaluates and integrates information from the above-mentioned reports of uses of the ACT COMP measures. The original purpose of this review was to determine the situations in which uses of COMP measures were and were not valid. However, many of the reported studies have flaws that undermine both their contribution to an evaluation of their institution’s general education program and their usefulness in evaluating uses of the COMP measures. Therefore, the purpose of this paper has been broadened to address as well the question of how to improve evaluations of general education programs. These two purposes are reflected in the following lessons to be learned.

Evaluating Uses of the COMP Measures in Program Evaluations

Perhaps the most important conclusion to be drawn about measuring general education outcomes is that defining the construct “general education” is very difficult. Three different approaches dominate the attempt at definition. One approach says that general education can be described by a curriculum and argues for one or another blend of core content. However, the multiplicity of programs reflects the extensive disagreement about what that core content should be (Gaff, 1983; Centra, 1988; Levine, 1978). A second approach says that general education is not the content per se, but rather is composed of higher order cognitive skills which can be integrated and applied in later life. In this approach, content is the laboratory in which the skills are acquired and exercised (Alverno College Faculty, 1976; Hunter, 1979).