GE Ethics SLO Assessment Spring 2012: summary(by A. Sterling)

**GE Student Learning Outcome 4:** Ethics of Knowledge

*At the completion of the LMC general education program, a student will consider the ethical implications inherent in knowledge, decision-making and action.*

**Number of participating faculty:** 7, from the following disciplines: humanities, biology, physics, and philosophy.

**The assessments:** Most assessments involved reading 1-3 articles or watching a film about an ethical topic and then doing some writing—either answering some questions or writing a short paper. One assessment (in humanities) was a whole-class debate in teams. One assessment was extra credit. One assessment was part of a large research project and required finding and reading a number of articles.

*Ethical topics:*

* Free choice current event (biology)
* Human population and China’s one-child rule (biology)
* The water crisis (biology)
* When and how to die (biology)
* Prescribing psychoactive drugs to youth (biology)
* Pros and cons of using fossil fuels (physics)
* Lab-created bird flu (biology)
* Various topics having to do with the “ethics of inequality” (philosophy)
* How Russia should be governed upon the death of Napoleon in 1812 (honors humanities)

**Synopsis of results:** A large majority of faculty felt that most or all of their students were proficient at the ethics SLO. For most assessments this meant students were able to (a) successfully summarize the issue and opposing views in a controversy or (b) successfully state and support an argument about the controversy.

**(Alex’s) Interpretation of results:**My interpretation mostly comes from comparing these results with my own in Philosophy 2, where I found much lower levels of proficiency. I realize this creates bias on my part, and other very different interpretations are quite possible. Also, we clearly didn’t get enough instructor participation to have a large enough sample.

My opinion is that most students are proficient, but only with fairly modest tasks. Most assessments involved only a small amount of reading—3 articles about a topic max, and often just one. Also, the writing was brief: exam questions and 1-page papers were common. My assessment in Phil 2 was part of a bigger project, a term paper, and required much more work from the students: they had to find, read, and digest 10 or more articles about a topic of their own choosing. A product of 3 weeks of work (and there were few other assignments during that 3 weeks), this paper wasn’t too long (3 pages), but was still a big task. The challenge mainly involved (a) finding 10 relevant and useful articles about the topic and (b) synthesizingquite a few readings in their summary of the debate. Accordingly, I found far fewer students to be up to snuff: 3 high, 10 proficient, 8 not proficient and 8 late or not-handed-in papers. (I realize the challenges I describe are about reading, research, and paper-writing, not ethics per se, so maybe my assessment instrument was flawed; however, it was a larger version of what most other instructors were doing for this assessment.) Later on in the semester, I found that only about 2/3 of the class were able to hand in passing 7-10 page argument papers, in spite of lots of scaffolding and half a semester to work on it with not much other homework.

All this results in my perception that students may be proficient, but at a modest level. The big question is, what level of skill is good enough to fulfill the requirements of this GE SLO? In our 4 GE seminars on ethics this year—only enough the scratch the surface of this rich topic—we never got close to answering this question, but I think we should answer it, somehow. In my opinion our students are on the whole not proficient at a 4-year level, or just barely getting there before transfer, but that’s just my perception and I won’t argue for it here. In Phil 2 all the students have passed Eng 100, yet their ability to do the work of an introductory college ethics course is extremely limited, in my view.

**About the very low levels of faculty participation in this assessment:** Some of this is my fault (and Scott’s); we put no effort into cracking the whip, so to speak, so we get what we get. Also, the big AA vote was overshadowing many other things this past semester. However, low numbers are a chronic problem at the GE seminars and in GE SLO assessment efforts in the last few years. As we revise our assessment and professional development practices to fit the new 5-year plan, this will be a big topic for discussion. Also, for this reason I hope many people will come to the GE Retreat this August 13!