The Liberal Arts Essentials Assessment Review Task Force was formed to analyze and evaluate evidence of the LAE curriculum’s effectiveness based on data and commentary reported for the years 2008-09 and 2009-10. The charge to the committee was framed around by a series of ten questions, each of which required examination of specific evidence. The emphasis on evidence in these framing questions was intentional and was designed to limit (if not eliminate) the coloring of the Task Force’s study with opinion, assumptions, and preconceptions about the LAE itself, the methods used to assess selected LAE courses, and concept of assessment. In addressing these questions, the Task Force chose to answer the framing questions by reference to the four goals of the LAE. These goals are:

1. Muskingum students will develop skills in perception, analysis, and expression.
2. Muskingum students will explore connections among formal learning, citizenship, and service to our communities.
3. Muskingum students will acquire multiple and integrative approaches to lifelong learning.
4. Muskingum students will demonstrate knowledge of physical wellness and of ethical and spiritual concepts. (p. 2)

The following is a summary of the Task Force’s findings for each framing question:

1. Is there evidence to support the idea that the four major goals of the LAE are aligned with the University’s mission statement?
   The Task Force found that in general the four LAE goals are aligned with the mission of the University. Goal 1 is aligned with the mission’s reference to fostering critical thinking. Goal 2 is aligned with the mission’s reference to developing socially responsible lives and fostering positive action. Goal 3 is inherent throughout the mission statement. Goal 4 is consistent with the mission statement’s reference to physically whole persons and to ethical sensitivity. Regarding lifelong learning, the Task Force observes that the LAE “provides a solid foundation for students’ lifelong learning but there is current no systematic and long-term way to assess this over time.” (pp. 2-3)

2. Is there evidence to support the idea that the LAE goals are aligned with the learning goals of many, if not all, of the University’s majors or programs?
   The Task Force found that while LAE goals and learning goals of major programs inherently overlap, alignment of the two sets of goals is not necessary. This is the result of the differentiated emphasis of the LAE and majors. The LAE emphasizes breadth of learning while majors emphasize depth of learning. The Task Force cited numerous examples of major program goals which are compatible with the four goals of the LAE.
For example, 29 programs include in their goals some form of “multiple and integrative approaches to lifelong learning.” (pp. 3-4)

3. Is there evidence suggesting that the area descriptions of the LAE categories [in the Catalog] are aligned with the four LAE goals?

_The Task Force found that the description of the LAE Core is aligned with all four LAE goals. The description of the category of Understanding Religion and Moral Inquiry is aligned with Goal 4b or 4c. However, the descriptions of the categories of Scientific Understanding and Cultural Understanding do not show clear alignment with LAE goals. The descriptors in these areas emphasize knowledge and understanding of content, whereas LAE goals are focused on specific skills. Goal 2 was found to be minimally present in descriptions of the LAE curriculum; courses are lacking to address this goal._ (pp. 3-4)

4. Is there evidence that the courses assigned to each LAE category are meeting the area descriptions of their respective categories?

_The Task Force found that the formats for LAE assessment plans and reports do not reference LAE area descriptions. Therefore explicit linkage between courses in the LAE categories outside the Core and the descriptions of the goals of these categories is largely absent. This lack of alignment is particularly evident, the Task Force found, in Areas B (Scientific Understanding) and C (Cultural Understanding). (p. 4)_

5. Is there evidence to suggest that, by and large, faculty believe that the quality of learning in LAE courses they are teaching is meeting the expectations of the goal or goals to which the courses are linked?

_The Task Force examined data from 60 classes distributed across the four LAE goals and found that 43 classes reported strong evidence (above 75% of students) that the LAE learning goal had been met or exceeded. Another 10 classes reported adequate evidence (50-75% of students) that the LAE learning goal had been met or exceeded. (pp. 5-6)_

6. Is there evidence to suggest that, by and large, students believe that the quality of learning in the LAE courses they are taking is meeting the expectations of the goal or goals to which the courses are linked?

_The Task Force examined data from 60 classes distributed across the four goals of the LAE and found that 48 classes reported strong evidence (above 75% of respondents) that the LAE goal with which the class was associated had been met or exceeded. Another 6 classes reported adequate evidence (50-75% of respondents) that the class had met or exceeded its LAE learning goal. (p. 6)_

7. Based on available evidence, are the perceptions of faculty and students consistent regarding LAE classes meeting or exceeding their LAE goals?

_The Task Force found that, for Goal 1, 13 of 22 classes reflected a reasonable level of consistency between faculty evaluations and student perceptions. For Goal 2, all 6 classes reflected consistency between faculty and student perspectives. For Goal 3, 15 of 17 classes reflected consistency between faculty and student perspectives. Of the remaining two classes in Goal 3, one submitted in accessible data and the other provided_
8. Is there evidence that LAE courses are being critically evaluated by faculty teaching these courses in order to improve teaching and learning?

Based on its review of assessment reports, the Task Force concludes that “faculty are learning from the process and really thinking deeply about their course material and the means by which they assess it.” For example, of the 22 assessment reports for Goal 1 courses, 14 (64%) contained evidence that faculty intended to make changes. In addition, all Physical Education and Religious Understanding class reports included proposed changes. (p. 8)

9. Based on available evidence, is critical examination and reflection leading to proposed instructional change evident in 50% or more of the classes assessed?

For Goal 1, more than half of the classes assessed (14 of 22) mentioned proposed instructional changes. There was no evidence of proposed changes in Goal 2 classes. More than half (8 of 13) Goal 3 classes included proposed instructional changes and 6 of 13 mentioned proposed changes in the method of assessment used. 13 of 17 classes in Goal 4 proposed changes for course content or assessment methods. (p. 8-9)

10. Does the evidence of reflection and change found in LAE assessment results support the idea that there is a culture of continuous improvement in the courses included in the LAE curriculum?

The Task Force found that evidence from classes in Goals 1, 3, and 4 (and summarized in Question 9) supports the idea of that there is a culture of continuous improvement in the LAE curriculum. Evidence from Goal 2 courses was inconclusive. (p. 10)

The Task Force’s report also contains certain concerns, problems, and suggestions for consideration in advance of beginning the next cycle of LAE learning assessment in 2011-12. Among these are the following:

- The assessment process needs to define more clearly the linkage among LAE goals, the learning objectives of the LAE goals, and the implicit learning objectives for the each LAE category as described in the University Catalog. (p. 3)
- The current format for LAE assessment plans and reports does not reference the LAE category descriptions found in the Catalog. Should these descriptions (which are implicit learning objectives) be included in the format for plans and reports? The Task Force suggests that the LAE assessment instruments somehow incorporate LAE learning objectives and learning objectives of the LAE categories as well as a single LAE goal (pp. 4, 11)
- Goal 2 seems “minimally present” in the LAE assessment and the LAE curriculum. Is it a viable LAE goal? (p. 3)
- There is often a drop in the number of students assessed from Stream 1 (faculty evaluation of student work) to Stream 2 (student perceptions) in the same class. This makes comparison of faculty and student data and perceptions difficult (p. 7).
- A few reports present data in an inaccessible form. Can a mechanism be created to ensure that data in all reports conforms to a common format (p. 8)?
- In order to improve the usefulness of Stream 1 data (assessment of student work), faculty need to be more cognizant of the difference between grading and LAE assessment. (p. 11)
- Stream 2 data is inconsistent to some extent. For example, it needs to be made clear to faculty that Stream 2 data is student-generated. It would also be preferable for student perception data to be reported in a single format rather than multiple formats.
- Stream 2 data suggests that students are equating success in meeting LAE goals with their course grade. What might be done to help students distinguish between their own performance in a class and the class’ success in meeting or exceeding its LAE goal (p. 12)?
- The report form needs a place or prompt encouraging faculty to share more data than the numbers placed in the exceeds/met/not met/ reporting box. A profile of the numbers of students scoring at various levels of the rubric could be provided. It would be particularly important to have additional data when a course meets a goal which has several learning objectives (p. 12).
- The Task Force believes the assessment process is very useful to faculty at the level of individual courses or sets of courses. It is less certain about the usefulness of assessment data at the “macro-level” (p. 12).
- All LAE data should be maintained in a well-organized and user-friendly fashion.
- An effort should be made to follow-up with faculty who proposed changes to assessment plans, course content, instruction, and/or assessment methods to see if the changes were actually implemented (p. 12-13).
- The Task Force concludes that “there is not yet a preponderance of evidence through the process of assessment to ascertain whether or not changes to the LAE are warranted” (p. 13).