In 2014-2015, the General Education Committee facilitated the assessment of the Understanding Society GE area. This GE area includes lower- and upper-division courses in Anthropology, Communication Studies, Interdisciplinary/Urban Studies, Economics & Business, History, Political Science, and Sociology. Lower-division Understanding Society courses comprise 50% of the area offerings. However, they are offered every semester and, thus usually, well-enrolled.

The assessment efforts were focused on a syllabi review, certification criteria revision, the SLO modification and direct assessment of student learning in relation to the area outcomes, which at that time were identical with the area certification criteria: **Students will be able to**

- *identify foundational theories that offer explanations of social, political, economic, and/or cultural phenomena*;
- *apply foundational theories to analyze contemporary problems or controversies*;
- *make personal and social application of various theories—informed by a biblical perspective*.

**Indirect Assessment**

In the fall of 2014, the GE Committee reviewed all 7 syllabi of the Understanding Society courses offered that semester. The syllabus review confirms that the majority of courses meet the certification criteria, although only 35% of syllabi followed the college’s syllabus template. This shortcoming was addressed at the Social Sciences department chair meeting.

During the fall semester, faculty teaching Understanding Society courses revised the area certification criteria and the interpretive statement.

**Direct Assessment**

**Methods and Tools**

During the spring semester, the faculty teaching the Understanding Society courses developed an analytical four-level rubric for evaluating signature assignments relevant to each particular discipline. This rubric was used for assessing student learning in the following six classes: AN-001: Intro to Cultural Anthropology; COM-006: Messages, Meaning and Culture; EB-011: Principles of Macroeconomics; HIS-178: California Experience; POL-010: American Government; and SOC-001: Introduction to Sociology. The scoring was done by course instructors.

It was expected that in all courses the same prompt questions will be used and they appeared to be modified in SOC-001 course. The signature assignment was administered at the end of the semester in all courses except for HIS-178, where the assignment was completed during the fourth week of classes. These aforementioned inconsistencies of data collection may have skewed the results.
The entire assessment sample consisted of 142 student artifacts provided by 67% of all students who earned the Understanding Society credit in the spring semester or 29% of all students who fulfilled the requirement in the fall, spring, and May term semesters of that academic year. Thus, it was determined that the sample was representative for this GE area.

Results
Some challenges with the data collection and scoring reliability made the results suggestive rather than conclusive, but clear trends that emerged as a result of the assessment. Nearly 75% of the students showed “highly developed” or “developed “capacities for identifying foundational theories and approaches. A slightly lower percentage was able to apply theories and approaches for analyzing historical or contemporary problems. The results also suggested that reflecting on theory application from a biblical perspective is a relative weakness in student performance. Only half of the students were able to demonstrate “developed” or “highly developed” capacity in this category.

The assessment results prompted a discussion about pedagogies and student learning. The faculty contemplated how to use the assessment results for improving student learning in their courses. They considered the possibilities to more fully engage students in discussions on theory application; to deliberate theory applications specific to their discipline as compared to other social sciences; to give quizzes on foundational theories prior to administering the signature assignment; to include more reading materials with the Christian faith application in their courses; and to coach students to think more critically about reading these materials, especially the controversial ones.

As the faculty members were less satisfied with students’ abilities to think about social theories from the perspective of their faith, a vigorous discussion ensued on teaching the integration of faith and learning in the Understanding Society courses. The group decided to continue the discussion in the coming academic year in the tradition of our “Brown Bag Conversations.”

Recommendations
1. The faculty teaching the Understanding Society courses will use assessment results for adjusting their pedagogical strategies in individual courses fulfilling this GE requirement.

2. Several discussions are planned for the coming year to provide faculty with a forum for reviewing the faith-learning data and develop expectations for student learning in this important area. Following these conversations, the academic departments offering the Understanding Society courses will be asked to develop and share their internal criteria for evaluating student reflections on theory application from a biblical perspective. Finally, a detailed plan will be set to improve student learning in this area.

3. Faculty teaching the Understanding Society courses will continue assessing student learning in this GE area by administering the signature assignment and by scoring student essays as per the refined rubric. The signature assignment will be administered at the end of the academic semester in all courses fulfilling this GE requirement. Samples of highly-developed, developed, emerging and initial responses to the signature assignment prompt will be collected by all contributing
departments and shall be used for establishing consistent scoring criteria across this GE area.

4. In the future, the assessment of this GE area will be focused on the Application of Approaches and Theories category. The rubric will be modified while the Reflections category will be eliminated. All students will be familiarized with the scoring rubric in advance and will respond to the following prompt question:

*Identify TWO theories or approaches you would use to analyze the problems presented in the article/material according to them. Provide your rationale for using these approaches and then thoroughly apply one theory before you apply the second theory.*

5. The faculty will be striving for a higher percentage of students at the “highly developed” and “developed” levels and the performance standards for this GE area will be tentatively established as follows:

*In all the Knowledge category of the rubric, 75% of students will perform at the “developed” level or better, while in the Application category, 70% of students will perform at the “developed” level or better.*

Given that the majority of students the Understanding Society credit are first year and sophomore students, these standards may be somewhat ambitious. Consequently, the standards shall be reviewed after next several rounds of the Understanding Society assessment.

6. The new area SLO will read as follows:

*Students will apply appropriate foundational theories to analyze social, political, economic, and/or cultural phenomena.*