

**The University of Nebraska at Kearney  
2007 Academic Program Review  
General Studies Program**

**Report of the Academic Program Review Team  
and of the External Reviewer,  
Paul L. Gaston, Provost, Kent State University**

This report reflects information, impressions, and questions prompted by the Academic Program Review Self-Study with regard to General Studies at the University of Nebraska at Kearney. Its organization responds to initial discussion within the review team on the evening of March 18 but embodies even more directly the results of discussions held by the team on March 19 and 20. The further questions it asks and the propositions it advances represent an effort to capture with some immediacy insights and issues developed through self-study and through two days of intensive consultation. While exercising primary responsibility for developing the successive drafts, the external reviewer emphasizes that this final report is a collaborative effort expressing contributions and thoughtful revisions from the members of the review team.

In addition to the external reviewer, members of the team are as follows: Tim Burkink and Steve Hall from the College of Business & Technology, Marlene Kuskie and Neil Schnoor from the College of Education, Gary Schaaf and Lee Snyder from the College of Fine Arts & Humanities, Suzanne Maughan and Janet Steele from the College of Natural & Social Sciences, Trudy de Goede from the Library, and an undergraduate student representative, Takeshi Morisato.

While no program review should ever be “routine,” this review may be especially uncharacteristic, in that it offers its perspective in the midst of an active reform discussion—perhaps comparable to undertaking extensive maintenance and technological upgrades on an airplane that may be replaced. On the one hand, the review team and external reviewer seek to be as helpful as possible, whether the present program continues or gives way to a significantly revised program. A review immediately shelved because it has been superseded by current discussions would have little value. On the other hand, both the review team and external reviewer are reluctant to intrude directly on discussions of curricular reform that appear to be approaching critical stages of communication and consultation. That is not the stated purpose of program review at UNK, after all. Hence this review, unlike that conducted in 2001, provides somewhat less detailed programmatic analysis of current strengths and weaknesses in favor of offering propositions intended to inform, stimulate, and broaden the discussions of general studies reform. Propositions, as opposed to recommendations, have the virtue of looking beyond possible changes in the present program to values that might be accomplished within a new one. Of course, one may derive from these positive propositions concerns heard by the review team with regard to the current program. Hence, even if no new program is forthcoming, many of the propositions would be equally helpful in guiding less dramatic modifications to the current one.

This preliminary report, then, is organized according to four elements. First, according to past practice, it will summarize widely respected attributes of the current program, those characteristics many wish to see preserved in any reform, and set forth other points in favor of retaining (perhaps with only modest reforms) the *status quo*. Second, the report will comment briefly on

some of the actions taken in response to the 2001 recommendations; a comprehensive report on these responses is provided in the self-study. Third, this report will for the record raise questions and offer suggestions regarding the correlation between program objectives and the current program itself, with particular attention to possible gaps between asserted goals and realized (or at least documented) accomplishments. Fourth, as suggested above, in lieu of recommendations, this report will record (and perhaps, in some instances, advance) points that should influence the continuing discussion of general studies. Again, these “propositions” are meant to support further discussion. There is no wish to encourage unrealistic aspirations. Rather, the propositions express the conviction that true pragmatism begins when all options are placed on the table for consideration.

This report rests on and should be considered in concert with the careful, thoughtful work evident in the self-study. Indeed, the relative brevity of this report is made possible by the detailed evaluation provided in that document. The external reviewer is most grateful to the members of the review team and to all members of the UNK community that have contributed to a thoughtful, collegial, and, above all, forward-looking review.

### **I STRENGTHS OF THE PRESENT PROGRAM WORTH PRESERVING**

Curricular reform represents an ambitious, time-consuming commitment. In addition to other resources that may be required, such reform necessarily involves opportunity costs. Retaining and perhaps fine-tuning the present program would avoid such costs, on the whole, and enable members of the faculty and administration to devote their effort to the ongoing work of general studies in its present form. Moreover, a renewed commitment to the present program would find support in certain conclusions of the review committee with regard to the program’s strengths.

- 1 The review committee believes that the mission of the General Studies program has been thoughtfully and persuasively articulated and endorses the stated objectives as commitments the program should continue to observe.
- 2 The review committee perceives a trade-off: although the diversity and flexibility of the current program weigh against access to the kind of common learning experiences that can create a strong sense of student community, all four-year UNK students (as the 2001 report recognized) are at least co-participants in a single program.
- 3 The review committee believes one virtue of the present program lies in its drawing broadly on the curriculum and the varied specialized expertise within the departments. (The 2001 report refers to “a high level of participation among the UNK faculty.”) Hence the program provides access to a broad range of curricular choices, described in the 2001 report as “a breadth of disciplines commensurate with the highest ideals of a liberal education.”
- 4 The review committee observes also that the present program is well regarded for its flexibility and “administrative convenience.” Given the number of UNK graduates who enter the university as transfer students, that is not an inconsiderable virtue.

## II COMMENTARY ON ACTIONS TAKEN IN RESPONSE TO 2001 RECOMMENDATIONS

The self-study report regards as largely satisfactory actions taken with regard to seven of the nine 2001 recommendations. While the report describes these actions in some detail, it will suffice for the present report to indicate those recommendations which appear to have been adequately addressed, as follows:

- #1 The development of “a more comprehensive rationale for the GS program structure, purpose, and student learning outcomes.” Both the self-study and the ensuing consultations (see I.1, above) have prompted the review committee to commend the description of the program and its role in the curriculum. The committee goes further, by endorsing the stated objectives “as commitments the program should continue to observe.”
- #3 The initiation of “a dialogue to consider several elements of the GS program.” As noted above, that dialogue is in progress at the time of this report. While the framers of the recommendation at the outset might have had in mind a more expeditious response, there is every indication that the dialogue continues to prove inclusive, creative, and provocative.
- #4 The appointment of a faculty member as director of the GS program.
- #5 The restructuring of the GS Council.
- #6 Clarification of the process by which changes to the GS program can be implemented.
- #7 The development of an assessment process. The self-study report indicates that considerable progress has been made. However, the review committee notes that the structure of the present program, commonly described as a “cafeteria” approach to general studies, discourages holistic programmatic study.
- #8 Greater emphasis on the importance of advising.

Recommendations that may deserve further attention are the following:

- #2 Of the six “immediate modifications” recommended in 2001, none appears to have led to substantive, conclusive, or demonstrable results.
  - Students are advised, not “required,” to complete English 101 and 102 in the first two years.
  - Foreign language remains an option beyond the formal scope of the GS program.
  - Encouragement to departments to limit class sizes appears to have run up against logistical and financial realities.
  - Upper division courses are not yet a conspicuous element in the GS program.
  - The “encouragement” that faculty “make connections between their GS courses and courses in other academic disciplines” may be no more effectual than a similar “encouragement” directed to students.

- The Capstone Course remains an issue under consideration. One member of the review team urged that this recommendation be acted upon promptly or dropped.
- #9 An interest in reconsidering the name of the program has resurfaced in the current review and appears as one of the propositions advanced by the report.

### III QUESTIONS REGARDING POSSIBLE GAPS BETWEEN ASPIRATION AND ACCOMPLISHMENT

As suggested above, the review committee continues to share a high regard for the stated mission and objectives of the program. However, while many members of the committee and of the university community believe that the objectives set forth beneath the clearly defined mission for general studies are, by and large, addressed throughout the curriculum in many general studies courses, there is also considerable agreement that the realization of these objectives is not well documented. Perhaps it cannot be assured. Hence, further consideration of the questions listed below may enable the university to become more explicit about the pursuit and accomplishment of such objectives. Ideally, each course offered for general studies credit should embody specific learning outcomes; faculty members should declare to students through their syllabi the objectives a particular course seeks to address; assessment should measure the extent to which such objectives are met; and the program should use what has been learned through assessment to strengthen the program.

- 1 What elements in the current program are directly correlated with the ability “to think independently, to question, to analyze, to interpret, and to judge”? *The current program might explicitly attribute to each course offered for general studies credit those learning objectives the course is expected to address. Moreover, the pedagogy employed in each course should reflect its objectives. For instance, it might be argued that a course intended to develop students’ ability “to think independently, to question, to analyze, to interpret, and to judge,” should hardly rely principally on lectures.*
- 2 In what ways does the current program enable students “to become aware of the relationships that exist among the disciplines?” Although the program statements indicate that students are “encouraged” to develop such awareness, the curricular materials do not make clear how the program supports that development. *The current program might at least provide students with an introductory overview of the disciplines they will encounter and the possible points of correspondence between them. Moreover, so far as possible, faculty members should be aware of such relationships—and of the value of articulating them—in order to expand the awareness of their students.*
- 3 Beyond the courses offered in the category, Personal Development, what elements in the program overall correlate with students understanding “how to apply the knowledge gained to personal development”? To what extent relative to this programmatic goal does the program rely on a student’s taking one course from this category? *The current program might define “personal development” more clearly, attribute discrete elements of such development to courses now made available through the dedicated category, and point to*

*opportunities for personal development made available through courses in other categories as well. For that matter, each faculty member might, as appropriate, indicate the personal developmental objectives in each course.*

- 4 What elements of the program correlate with students understanding “how to apply the knowledge gained to contemporary problems in the world”? Is application a familiar emphasis in all general studies courses? *The current program might indicate more clearly how this goal is realized, and it might invite students to the experience of applied knowledge through far more explicit attention to the opportunities it offers.*
- 5 Which elements of the program provide the following:
  - a Ability to locate and gather information?
  - b Capability for critical thinking, reasoning, and analyzing?
  - c Communication skills?
  - d Understanding of “the experiences and values of groups and cultures which have been historically under-represented”?

*By identifying which courses address each of these objectives, the program would provide its students with far clearer pathways and challenge both faculty and students to realize such objectives in explicit ways that may be documented through assessment.*

- 6 To what extent are the “perspective objectives” (Self-Study, Appendix J) clearly communicated to students through the catalog, through syllabi, and through the conduct of courses? To what extent do these objectives correlate with the broader “overall objectives” of the GS program? *The perspective objectives might be far more clearly expressed within the appropriate documents of the university and made explicit for faculty and students alike. In addition, correlation of these objectives with the broader “overall objectives” of the program would contribute to their currency and credibility as prompts to priorities in the classroom.*

#### **IV PROPOSITIONS TO SUPPORT FURTHER DISCUSSION OF PROGRAMMATIC REFORM**

- 1 General Studies might be renamed so as to suggest the University’s commitment to the program as a priority: e.g., “General Education,” “Essential Studies,” “Essential Education,” etc. One concern voiced by the committee is that the title of the program should be so compelling as to discourage its relegation to ancillary or peripheral status.
- 2 Any reform of General Studies should aspire to develop a program that provides “an exciting, unforgettable introduction to a UNK education.” This quote from one colleague interviewed by the committee may serve as a compelling summons to improved quality and to singularity. Improved quality represents a broad and complex commitment addressed by this report as a whole. Greater singularity might be achieved in part, however, through the program’s greater attention to the university’s unique home base: sandhill cranes as a focus in biology, the threatened aquifer of the Platte River in geography and ecology, the transportation “hub” identity in history, the tradition of Willa Cather in literature, the dynamics of rural communities in sociology, the strong influence of native Americans in

anthropology, the balance between agriculture (west) and industry (east) in business and geography, the dynamics of hedge funds in the trading of grains in finance, etc.

- 3 A reformed program should offer visible coherence, from “portal” courses shared by first-year students through discipline-oriented core courses to disciplinary “capstone” courses offering opportunities for integration. The committee recognizes that much work remains to define these levels but endorses the principle that a recognizable sequence should be made apparent over time.
- 4 All courses qualifying for general education credit should be clearly intentional as to desired outcomes, sufficiently rigorous in expectation and delivery to challenge and engage students, and sufficiently alert to correspondences among disciplines to support students’ efforts at integrating the different courses they take. As one colleague said in dialogue with the committee, while some courses must perforce remain “informative,” others should aspire to become “formative.” And all courses should be clear with regard to their intentions.
- 5 Program reform should embody a broadly understood and supported paradigm shift, from an emphasis on courses and departmental needs to an emphasis on students and their learning. Finally, the most compelling “departmental need” is to provide effective education for the students of UNK.
- 6 So that General Studies courses may be taught by fully-qualified, committed, engaged teaching and library faculty members, the university should support this paradigm shift by investing in the professional development of all faculty. Such development should focus on learning-centered pedagogy, on means of addressing different student learning styles, and on means of effective distance learning.
- 7 Any reform of General Studies should reflect the emerging demands students are facing for evaluating and making responsible use of scholarly sources and of emerging technologies. Students today face unprecedented challenges in identifying valid and reliable information within the welter of unsupervised data that may be found on the internet. UNK must assist these students in framing values equivalent to their skills.
- 8 Assessment must be “built in” to any revised program and developed according to clearly articulated instructional goals. Pre-testing should establish a point of departure for post-testing, and assessment results should be employed to strengthen the courses and program under review. Properly conceived and implemented, effective assessment does not “grade” faculty. Like the videotaping and analysis of a golf swing, assessment provides faculty members with indicators they may use in improving their effectiveness.
- 9 Reforms should aim at creating a competitive advantage in the recruitment of students, not create impediments to recruiting and retaining them. Behind this axiom lies the conviction of the review committee that a distinctive, student-centered, effective general studies program could become a compelling attraction to superior students seeking to choose their institution with care.

- 10 So that students may “become aware of the relationships that exist among the disciplines,” both liberal studies courses and courses in the major should be more highly cognizant of one another. Liberal studies courses should point to the application within the major of the values, knowledge, and skills they teach. Courses in the major should reflect so far as possible a liberal, associative view of the discipline taught.
- 11 Effective implementation of any change initiative requires careful thought, preparation, and sensitivity to the values of the academic culture. As the discussion continues, the review team encourages broad communication, in writing, among all concerned constituencies.