

Report of the Academic Program Review Team for General Studies at The University of Nebraska at Kearney

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Abstract

The materials reviewed in the self- study and the information obtained in the site visit both indicate a quality, coherent program which has been carefully thought out, developed, and implemented over a period of years with thorough attention to substance and process. The program has been developed with extensive and diverse faculty involvement. It has many strengths in design, implementation and assessment which evidence strong leadership. In this section, we will summarize the strengths of the program. Some of the strengths will also be mentioned in the context where they are appropriate in the other sections of the report. In those sections, recommendations and suggestions for change will also be made when appropriate. Then they will be repeated as a group in the recommendations section of this report.

Among the most obvious **design** strengths are:

- The program is based on and is consistent with the institutional mission.
- The program is unified and common to all undergraduates beginning at The University of Nebraska at Kearney.
- The program was developed using a process of roundtable discussions involving extensive faculty input.
- The program has elements of sequence which have logical coherence beginning with portal and foundation courses and ending with a capstone course.
- The portal course focuses on basic critical thinking.
- The capstone course focuses on integrative thinking.
- Objectives for each element of the curriculum have been carefully thought through and explicitly specified.
- The design takes into consideration the recommendations of the previous reviews and largely implements them, or indicates why they have not been accepted.
- The learning experience of students has been given the top priority in program design.
- Assessment was built into the basic program design.
- A method for making a full range of changes was built into the program design.
- An appropriate appeals procedure for students is included in the program design.
- Some flexibility for transfer students is built into the program design.
- The program has clear and generally appropriate outcome objectives.

- The program self-study proposes some directions for future development.
- The program includes a mechanism for community college articulation.

Among the most obvious strengths in **implementation** are:

- The program has a governance structure involving a council with extensive faculty input.
- The program has regularly scheduled meetings for the governance council.
- There is a clearly specified process for implementing substantial and routine changes in the program.
- A gradual rolling implementation schedule in course assessment was integrated into the program design.
- A training program for faculty involved in the general studies program has been initiated.

Among the most obvious strengths in the general studies **assessment processes** are:

- The program incorporates several of The Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) best practice policies.
- The program builds on the experience of comparison schools.
- Assessment of the portal course is already leading to change in that course indicating an operating feedback loop.
- The use of a nationally standardized rubric as a guide for assessment of the courses was adopted.
- The council initiated an early step toward creating an Inter-coder reliability process.
- There are common assessment procedures across the whole program.
- Student input informed the assessment process (2011 student survey).

All of these strengths indicate strong leadership by the director of the General Studies Program and committed support by the General Studies Council. This is a critical strength.

These strengths indicate a maturely conceived program which is in the orderly process of full implementation and evaluation.

Broad directions for the future are discussed in detail in the following sections of the report. Because the program is new and still not yet fully implemented, and because The University of Nebraska at Kearney has a rapidly approaching North Central Association visit, the implementation of many of these suggested changes should be delayed until after that visit.

Review team proposals for consideration are of two types: adjusting the program, and broadening the vision. There are a number of “adjusting the program” recommendations and

suggestions relating to the assessment program, the policy document and organization of general studies, funding of TaskStream and other parts of the program and details of the curriculum. A few paragraphs are added by way of introducing a broader vision of general education, some of which might be considered by the institution as general studies continues to evolve over the next few years.

Evaluation of the Self-Study Document

The Self-Study was prepared according to the APR Guidelines. The Self-Study included all appropriate components for a General Studies Program review. Parts of sections four, five, and six in the APR Guidelines are unnecessary for a General Studies Program review and were appropriately excluded.

The Self-Study was very detailed, extremely thorough, and easy to follow. The document provided evidence that the program is based on, and is consistent with the mission.

An accurate portrayal of the process used in developing, launching, and assessing the new General Studies Program was described. The document was historically accurate in that it included sections titled “Considerations for program renewal from the 2007 program review” (Academic Program Review pp. 109-124), and “Academic Program Review, 2001” (Academic Program Review pp. 13-16). The information provided in these sections was very helpful. For example, proposition #3 of the 2007 review stated the following, “a reformed curriculum should offer coherence, from freshman ‘portal’ courses through discipline-oriented core courses to a disciplinary ‘capstone’ course.” (Academic Program Review p.14) The Self-Study includes and responds to the recommendations from these previous reviews, such as this one, and reports on their implementation where appropriate. In addition, recommendations for future directions were proposed.

A balanced presentation of campus views of the historic strengths and weaknesses of the General Studies Program was provided. For example, actual survey results, from student and faculty surveys in 2005 and 2011 were reported. Over half of the faculty responded to the survey reported on pages 129-136 of the Self-Study. Only a small majority of these were positive about the development process and substance of the new program. Universities foster and encourage diversity of opinion among professionals, so such diversity of response is not surprising. The development of the program was under time constraints from the regional accrediting agency. Given this time constraint, the process was very collegial and open. Only about 10% of the faculty felt negatively enough to write critical comments.

Faculty expressed three concerns in the 2011 survey which were not clearly described in the Self-Study, but were clarified during the team visit. These were, the degree to which academic advising is integrated into the program, the fit of foreign language into the program requirements, and the degree to which credits taken by transfer students apply to the completion of their general studies.

The surveys conducted in 2005 and 2011 provided a great deal of useful data which can be used as a baseline for further research. Follow-up surveys would assist program leadership in more objectively determining any change in perceptions of the General Studies Program which have taken place.

Recommendation 1: The General Studies Council should conduct a follow up survey of student and faculty perceptions of the General Studies Program.

Evaluation of the Mission of the Department / Program

Mission and Goals

The mission of the General Studies Program at The University of Nebraska at Kearney (UNK) aligns itself with the mission of the university in a significant way. The program is designed to help “students acquire knowledge and abilities to: understand the world, make connections across disciplines, and contribute to the solution of contemporary problems” which is in harmony with the university’s mission (www.unk.edu/uploadedFiles/about/strategicplan/SPC Phase 1.pdf (Page 1)), and its stated commitments to:

- “A holistic concept of student development...
- Student learning...
- A curriculum that provides solid grounding for all students in the liberal arts and, sciences while also enabling them to specialize and to prepare for careers...
- Processes to assess student learning and to adjust plans, programs, and budgets in light of that appraisal.”

(www.unk.edu/uploaded Files/about/strategicplan/SPC Phase 1.pdf (Page 2)).

The structure of the General Studies Program itself exhibits this alignment with the mission of the university. The program is unified and common to all matriculating undergraduates and developed to be a sequential educational experience beginning with portal and foundation courses and ending with the capstone course. Within the program, Foundational Core courses

provide students with the basic skill set in oral and written communication, math, and understanding of democracy. The solid grounding in liberal arts and sciences and preparation for career development is provided through the Distribution courses which include courses from all four undergraduate colleges. The portal courses, which focus on the development of critical thinking skills, and capstone courses, which focus on integrative thinking, foster the development of student's ability to become life-long learners.

In keeping with the spirit of the university's mission, the program also envisions incorporating "the values and objectives of academic disciplines, and prepare[ing] students for life in global society." (UNK Strategic Plan). This commitment is reflected in the program's stated objectives used in the assessment process of the overall program and the individual categories within each area of the program (e.g., Foundational Core, Portal, Distribution Courses, and Capstone).

The General Studies Program mission statement, which informed the development of the new program, implemented in fall 2010, was written as the result of Phase I Roundtables in 2005-2006. Mission statements should be reviewed on a regular basis to ensure currency and consistency with current practices. In addition, since that time the role of online education has become increasingly prominent. Since it has been several years since the adoption of the current mission statement, and the growth of the market for online education, the Review Team recommends the following:

Recommendation 2: The General Studies Council should revisit the mission statement of General Studies for currency including the examination of the role of online education.

Trends

The focus on revitalizing general education programs to incorporate the skills which enable college graduates to be "engaged citizens" has been an important topic in higher education for some time. This discussion has resulted in numerous campuses changing general education programs from a "cafeteria style" program to a more cohesive program that has distinct and assessable learning outcomes. The renewal of UNK's General Studies program has followed this trend and the new program reflects a more cohesive program that is mission driven and assessable.

The new General Studies Program (implemented in Fall 2010) was guided by *Greater Expectations: A New Vision for Learning as a Nation Goes to College* (National Panel Report AAC&U) and the best practices in liberal education of fifty-some colleges and universities; leading to a more cohesive General Studies Program for UNK. The learning goals developed were in line with much of the latest thinking on effective liberal education. These include:

- Inquiry and analysis
- Critical and creative thinking
- Written and oral communication
- Quantitative literacy
- Teamwork and problem solving

Moving forward, UNK’s strategic plan obliges all programs to “...encompass regional, national and world environments,” to provide “...opportunities to develop and to learn through leadership and service,” and to “...enable students to pursue special interests, to develop a sense of responsibility to lead and to serve, and to acquire skills enhancing interpersonal effectiveness.” Combining this with how AAC&U sees liberal education as a *philosophy of education that empowers individuals with broad knowledge and transferable skills, and a strong sense of value, ethics, and civic engagement* and as an “*education (that) helps students develop a sense of social responsibility...*” (www.aacu.org/resources/liberaleducation/index.cfm) The Review Team suggests the following:

Suggestion 1: The University should consider broadening the vision of General Studies Program to better match the institutional mission by including a greater focus on, and assessment of ethics, personal values, social responsibility, information literacy, technology literacy, and making value judgments.

The University of Nebraska at Kearney is structured with a Senior Vice Chancellor who has responsibility for both Academic Affairs and Student Affairs. This provides an ideal structural arrangement for aligning some of the activities of Student Affairs with General Studies Program goals. Student Affairs staff with whom the team visited said that they were already moving to align their assessment outcomes with those of the General Studies Program goals. This is a positive first step.

Suggestion 2: The General Studies Council and the Director of General Studies should broaden the program by integrating campus and community activities in collaboration with the Division of Student Affairs.

Evaluation of Program Resources

The General Studies Program has made efficient and effective use of its limited operating budget in order to meet the requirements of the University for maintaining and enacting the

new General Studies Program. The program should be especially commended for the work of its Director and the General Studies Council who have truly gone beyond the call of duty in establishing the new program and creating the assessments needed to measure the learning outcomes of the curriculum. The governance document and overall structure have served well to guide the process in the creation of new courses, changes in courses and changes in the program itself. In studying the Self-Study document and from hearing testimony from faculty members, chairs, the Director of General Studies, and the General Studies Council, several areas came to light in which changes could lead to more efficient functioning of the programs and set the stage for continuous improvement of the program and the courses within.

TaskStream Costs

TaskStream has recently been adopted campus-wide in conjunction with the General Studies Program as a tool to facilitate assessment across a large number of classes and students. Although not all classes have been assessed at this point, due to the plan to gradually roll out assessment in a methodical manner; all General Studies Program classes will be assessed within the next year or two using TaskStream as the primary interface for students, faculty and assessors. However, considerable concern has been raised by both students and faculty members regarding the cost of TaskStream. Currently, students are asked to purchase TaskStream at the cost of approximately \$42 per student per year. However, if the university purchased TaskStream as a site-license the cost to students would be only \$24 per student per year. Students and many faculty members feel that assessing this fee in the current manner is unsatisfactory and needlessly expensive for the students.

Recommendation 3: The General Studies Council should recommend that the university purchase a site license for TaskStream and assess a campus wide student fee to cover the cost.

Resources for Faculty Training

Effective teachers are essential for a successful General Studies Program, particularly given that the General Studies Program is the largest program on campus and constitutes more than 37% of the required hours for an undergraduate degree. While some resources are available to faculty to build their general teaching skills, e.g. Center for Teaching Excellence workshops; additional resources focused on developing teaching skills specifically for the General Studies Program are needed to maintain a high-quality program.

Recommendation 4: Additional funding should be allocated to the General Studies Program to promote teacher development, to aid course development, and to provide professional support across campus for all faculty members who seek to improve their teaching within the General Studies Program. Additional resources should also be available for the Director and

selected faculty to travel to conferences and workshops to stay abreast of current teaching developments and assessment practices in general studies.

General Studies Reporting Structure

Clear and direct reporting lines are crucial for effective communication. The current reporting structure is circuitous and potentially complicated; which may not only lead to miscommunication between parties, but may also result in duplication of workload and slowing down of process. At the present time, the General Studies Director reports to the Associate Senior Vice Chancellor; however, the General Studies Council reports to the Senior Vice Chancellor or through the General Studies Director to the Associate Senior Vice Chancellor. This is cumbersome and limits the ability of the program director to lead effectively. Further, the program director has no control over the number and variety of portal and capstone courses. This creates a serious limitation in the director's ability to lead, plan, and provide efficient use of resources in meeting the needs of the students.

Recommendation 5: The University should clarify and simplify the reporting lines for the General Studies Director and the General Studies Council by having the General Studies Council report to the General Studies Director who would then report to a single administrator.

Recommendation 6: The University should grant to the General Studies Program Director authority to manage the number and variety of portal and capstone courses offered in any given semester.

Assessment

The dedication of the current General Studies Director is commendable, and beyond that for which he is compensated. Furthermore, he has shown excellent use of the allocated budget and ability to stretch the budget even further than expected. While these are admirable efforts, they have their limits. When the burden of assessment is added to the Director's responsibilities it restricts the Director's abilities to perform these other tasks as well as limiting his ability to perform the leadership tasks of visioning for change and improvement. It increases the time he must spend on his duties as a manager and reduces the time he has to be a creative leader.

The UNK Assessment Director is a valuable resource to the functioning of the General Studies Program and remarkable achievements have been made to this point. As the new General Studies Program unfolds, appropriate assessment of each course and closing the feedback loops by making appropriate change is critical to the continuing evolution and improvement of

the program. In the past, the General Studies Director, in collaboration with the General Studies Council, has been primarily responsible for not only implementing assessment, but also for analyzing data. Such a task should be beyond the scope of the Director's responsibility, especially given the magnitude of other tasks with which the Director is charged.

Recommendation 7: The University should expand the Director of Assessment position to a full time appointment and transfer the assessment of the General Studies Program to that office.

Suggestion 3: Additional release time support for faculty may be needed to assist in analyzing assessment data.

Recommendation 8: The University should relieve the General Studies Director of routine tasks in coordinating the program and its assessment by increasing General Studies Program support staff. This shift of routine responsibilities will enable the General Studies Director to have more time and energy to develop and support the General Studies Program vision, to negotiate for classes, and to apply creative concepts to a developing program.

Evaluation of Department/Program Effectiveness

The program is well designed with extensive input from both within the university and through the use of comparison groups. It provides broad coverage of the full range of areas generally considered to constitute general education or general studies. There is general agreement among the faculty and on the General Studies Council that it is more coherent and well-conceived than the previous program. It provides a rich selection of options within these areas. The design employing a portal course and a capstone course constitutes best practice in this respect.

The recent reduction in overall hours by The University of Nebraska Board of Regents from 125 to 120 hours for a baccalaureate degree resulted in cuts to academic majors. Some feel that a proportional cut should have been made in the general studies requirements reducing the effect on the academic majors. There is a real concern that the high ACT requirement for entry into English 102 makes English 101 a hidden prerequisite and in actuality expands the general studies curriculum to 48 hours, which is on the very high side for a state institution.

Recommendation 9: The requirements for the size of the General Studies Program should be carefully considered and should be transparent to the students with no unclear or hidden prerequisites.

Assessment of areas within the General Studies Program is taking place and data are being collected regularly. Rubrics have been established which allow for comparative evaluation across course titles within sections of the curriculum and across disciplinary areas of the curriculum.

The use of a common centralized software package, TaskStream, is being a great advantage to the General Studies Program. However, the current funding mechanism for TaskStream is cumbersome and irritating to students and faculty. The need to change this mechanism is indicated in Recommendation 3. Further, students should be educated as to the value for their education of having a strong assessment program.

Inter-coder reliability mechanisms are just beginning to be considered and should be developed to ensure comparability of coding for rubrics across the curricular offerings. This inter-coder reliability will make the adoption of uniform rubrics across the campus a much stronger asset.

Recommendation 10: Inter-coder reliability protocols need to be established and regularly checked across sections within a course number and across disciplinary areas of the curriculum.

Longitudinal assessment data exist for a few general studies courses. However, it will take longer to longitudinally evaluate all of the classes within each of the categories, as measurement is being phased in on a rolling basis; and not all areas of the curriculum have had even their first full evaluation. As longitudinal measures are added, consideration should be given to employment of more value added components. For example, a writing exam such as the ACT writing section could be given before entry into and at the end of English 101 to assess the value added by the course as well as the average level of writing competency of the students at the end of the course.

Recommendation 11: The institution should initiate longitudinal assessment procedures when the rolling in of the assessment measures provides longitudinal data opportunities, and expand the use of value added measures.

Faculty members seem to understand the purpose, processes and structure of the program and why assessment data need to be collected and analyzed. There is, however, a general consensus that the assessment program is becoming unwieldy as it is becoming more fully rolled out. It would, therefore be useful to assess the assessment process itself to consider which elements provide the most useful information and which are marginally useful or cost ineffective. In addition, assessment protocols may be simplified by taking appropriate samples rather than assessing the population, or assessing outcomes in each area periodically rather than assessing all areas each semester.

Recommendation 12: Assessment of the assessment process needs to be undertaken with a goal of improving and simplifying the process.

There was some discussion among the members of the team of the size of the General Studies Council which seemed to the team leader to be excessive for efficient functioning. When the General Studies Council was asked about this issue they indicated they liked the number of three from each college because it allowed full college representation when one or more of the representatives from a college were absent. At the same time, some members of the council complained about how hard it was to get things done and how long it took.

Suggestion 4: The institution might give consideration to the size of the General Studies Council.

Data indicated great variation in the number of students in the different courses within the General Studies Program. Of course, some considerable variation across disciplines and curricular levels is expected. However, some systematic protocol should be in place for specifying maximum and minimum number of students for each type of course in order to assure maximum efficiency. This might allow reallocation of some resources to facilitate expanded use of team teaching of capstone courses.

Suggestion 5: The General Studies Council and Director should consider establishing a protocol for determining maximum and minimum size of various types of general studies courses.

One of the strengths of the program is the wide variety of courses which fill general studies requirements at all levels. At the same time that this is a strength, it also reduces the common core of knowledge which is shared by all students and makes more problematic the cohesiveness of the program. These issues might be addressed by reducing the number of options available to students or by introducing a linking element in the freshman year such as a common reader which would be discussed each year as a part of every portal course and all the Foundational Core offerings.

Suggestion 6: The General Studies Council and the Director of General Studies should explore methods of introducing more commonality in the portal and Foundational Core courses as a way of introducing greater coherence and commonality in the first year.

Recommendations for the Future

Recommendation 1: The General Studies Council should conduct a follow up survey on student and faculty perceptions of the General Studies Program.

Recommendation 2: The General Studies Council should revisit the mission statement of General Studies for currency, including the examination of the role of online education.

Recommendation 3: The General Studies Council should recommend that the university purchase a site license for TaskStream and assess a student fee to cover the cost.

Recommendation 4: Additional funding should be allocated to the General Studies Program to promote teacher development, to aid course development and to provide professional support across campus for all faculty members who seek to improve their teaching within the General Studies Program. Additional resources should also be available for the Director and selected faculty to travel to conferences and workshops to stay abreast of current teaching development and assessment practices in general studies.

Recommendation 5: The University should clarify and simplify the reporting lines for the General Studies Program Director and the General Studies Council by having the General Studies Council report to the General Studies Director who would then report to a single administrator.

Recommendation 6: The University should grant to the General Studies Program Director authority to manage the number and variety of portal and capstone courses offered in any given semester.

Recommendation 7: The University should expand the Director of Assessment position to a full time appointment and transfer the assessment of The General Studies Program to that office.

Recommendation 8: The University should relieve the General Studies Program Director of routine tasks in coordinating the program and its assessment by increasing General Studies Program support staff. This shift of routine responsibilities will enable the General Studies Director to have more time and energy to develop and support the General Studies Program vision, to negotiate for classes, and to apply creative concepts to a developing program.

Recommendation 9: The requirements for the size of the General Studies Program should be carefully considered and should be transparent to the students with no unclear or hidden prerequisites.

Recommendation 10: Inter-coder reliability protocols need to be established and regularly checked across sections within a course number and across disciplinary areas of the curriculum.

Recommendation 11: The institution should initiate longitudinal assessment procedures when the rolling in of the assessment measures provides longitudinal data opportunities, and expand the use of value added measures.

Recommendation 12: Assessment of the assessment process needs to be undertaken with a goal of improving and simplifying the process.

Suggestion 1: The University should consider broadening the vision of the general studies program to better match the institutional mission by including a greater focus on, and assessment of ethics, personal values, social responsibility, information literacy, technology literacy, and making value judgments in the courses offered in the program.

Suggestion 2: The General Studies Council and the Director of General Studies should broaden the program by integrating campus and community activities in collaboration within the Division of Student Affairs.

Suggestion 3: Additional release time support for faculty may be needed to analyze assessment data.

Suggestion 4: The institution might give consideration to the size of the General Studies Council.

Suggestion 5: The General Studies Council and Director should consider establishing a protocol for determining maximum and minimum number of students for various types of general studies courses.

Suggestion 6: The General Studies Council should explore methods of introducing more commonality in the portal and core courses as a way of introducing greater coherence and commonality in the first year.

Concluding Remarks

The team wishes to express its appreciation to Dr. Daren Snider who worked tirelessly to make our team visit comfortable and efficient. The physical arrangements were excellent and the responses to our requests were timely and complete. We also wish to express appreciation to those who visited with the team members and who assisted in the development of the Self-Study for their candid opinions and insights.