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- Executive Summary

For the purpose of providing an executive summary, I wish to identify several strengths of the General Studies Program (GSP) at the University at Nebraska (UNK):

- a single general education program that reflects the mission of the university and serves the needs of the four UNK colleges;
- a curriculum that provides a foundation for the depth of work in the major programs;
- a breadth of disciplines commensurate with the highest ideals of a liberal education;
- wide course availability;
- very strong support among UNK alumni and, to a lesser but still significant degree, among the current student body and UNK faculty;
- a high level of participation among the UNK faculty; and
- a strong emphasis on writing-intensive and cultural diversity courses.

Although I believe that UNK should retain the GSP as its general education program for all four university colleges, the faculty and administration should consider several measures that could strengthen the liberal education of the GSP even further:

- developing a more comprehensive rationale for the program structure, elements, and purpose;
- instituting a reformatted governance structure that includes a director, a restructured General Studies Council (GSC), and clearly established approval procedures for changes to the program;
- focusing more on advising students as they take courses in the GSP;
- assessing the overall effectiveness of the GSP;
- reconsidering the program's name; and
- re-evaluating several structural issues and policies.

A fuller explanation of these issues appears in the pages below.

- Introductory Remarks

Prior to my visit to the University of Nebraska at Kearney (UNK) campus, I studied data gathered by Dr. John Anderson, Associate Professor of Political Science. In the spring of

2001, over 400 UNK alumni who had graduated after 1995 were contacted by phone and asked a series of questions about their perceptions of the General Studies Program (GSP). In addition to conveying their satisfaction with course availability and choice, they consistently expressed their approval of the writing, communicating, and problem solving skills engendered by the program. Dr. Anderson also provided input from twenty currently enrolled undergraduates in the form of focus group responses. These individuals too had positive impressions of many elements of the GSP, including its ethos of providing a broad liberal education. The focus groups, however, expressed concerns about issues such as large class sizes and the tendency of some classes to serve as preparatory courses for a major. Some students, after acknowledging the importance a liberal arts education, admitted that they were unable to see how the GSP was fulfilling this goal.

Dr. Anderson also undertook a comprehensive survey of the UNK faculty, and here again the results were informative. Of the 280 faculty members had an opportunity to respond to the survey, 269 replied, resulting in a response rate of 96%. I reviewed all the data tables generated by the survey results and I have read all the supplementary comments the faculty respondents provided (some 23 single-spaced pages). Although faculty members offered considerably different views about specific elements of the GSP, the vast majority expressed a general satisfaction with the program. Nevertheless, the results of the faculty survey and the many narrative comments indicated to me that some members had serious misgivings about individual elements of the GSP and even about the structure, purpose, and philosophy of the entire program.

During my visit to the campus of UNK October 23-25, 2001, I had the occasion to talk with students, faculty, administrators, and staff about the University's General Studies Program. These meetings included conversations with Dr. James Roark, Senior Vice-Chancellor, and Dr. Ken Nikels, Dean of Graduate Studies and Research; the Deans or Assistant to the Deans of all four colleges; most of the department chairs; approximately 30 faculty members; the General Studies Council; and multiple staff members. At these meetings I provided my Truman State University e-mail address and invited the UNK members to contact me with any further comments they wished to share (and several did accept this offer). Finally, I had extended discussions with the thirteen-person review team, whose membership included two representatives from each of the four university colleges; a representative from the library; Dr. Bill Wozniak, Faculty Senate President; and three student members.

As a result of studying Dr. Anderson's data, visiting the campus, and having extended conversations with multiple members of the UNK community, I have prepared this report.

- Areas of Strength in the General Studies Program

The GSP at the University of Nebraska at Kearney provides its students with a broad introduction to liberal studies through its emphasis on the humanities, mathematics, natural sciences, and social sciences. The program, a modified "cafeteria" or

"distribution" model in which students select 45 hours of coursework from a variety of subject areas, is correctly characterized in the University's mission statement as an "extensive general studies curriculum that emphasizes the liberal arts." The categories are well balanced and arranged according to the conventions of liberal education; courses within the GSP appear to be rigorous and demand students to be versatile learners in a variety of different academic disciplines. The addition of the "Personal Development" category is especially intriguing. Although this requirement falls outside traditional definition of liberal arts, classes that fulfill this requirement offer students the opportunity to make meaningful connections between in-class work and the situations they face outside the classroom. I am very pleased by the commitment the university has made to writing and diversity through its adoption of writing-intensive and cultural diversity courses. While these requirements are not part of the GSP *per se*, the faculty and students tend to think of them as an integral part of UNK's general education program.

I also commend the entire University community for creating and maintaining a general education program that reflects the mission of the university **and** serves the needs of the colleges of Business and Technology; Education; Fine Arts and Humanities; and Natural and Social Sciences. Although several faculty members felt that one or more of the colleges should create its own general education program, the vast majority of faculty and administrators with whom I talked felt that the GSP served the needs of the major programs and the colleges. On repeated occasions I heard allusions to the seven separate general education curricula of the University of Nebraska at Lincoln and the problems this duplication presents. The simple fact that all four UNK colleges share a single program instills a sense of shared identity among the faculty and the understanding that they all have ownership in the GSP. For these reasons I am pleased that the GSP possesses a flexibility that allows academic departments to identify specific courses their majors should take.

The data gathered by Dr. Anderson demonstrate a general satisfaction among the students, post-1995 alumni, and faculty. The alumni appear to be especially pleased and credit the GSP with helping to develop many skills they now find useful. The faculty appears to be the group least satisfied with the program, although one may make the argument that even here there is a general contentment. According to the survey results, 65% of the faculty respondents assign the GSP a grade of "B" or higher, while, 35% assign a grade of "C" or lower. When one analyzes the results to the survey questions and reads the narratives the faculty provided, again a pattern of satisfaction becomes obvious. I offer my congratulations to all the past and present UNK faculty and administrators who developed the GSP.

- Areas of Concern for the General Studies Program

Despite my opinion that the state of the GSP is strong and that UNK undergraduates are receiving a strong liberal education, my study of university data and conversations with many members of the UNK community convinces me that the University should address several aspects of the program. Paramount in my recommendations is an attempt to address the concerns of the many faculty members with whom I have spoken. During my

visit I was especially pleased by their commitment to student learning and their obvious concern with the academic rigor of the GSP. Their suggestions are integral in all elements of this report.

1. Rationale of the GSP

Recommendation #1: the University should develop and publicize a more comprehensive rationale for the General Studies Program structure, purpose, and student learning outcomes.

Although students may appreciate the broad nature of the GSP curriculum, many of them do not understand **how** the GSP provides a broad liberal arts education and establishes a foundation for the in-depth work of their major programs. The University has identified the "Philosophy" and "Objectives" for the program and addresses the student learning outcomes within the eight individual areas (pp. 47-50 of the *2002 UNK Undergraduate Catalog*), yet the responses of the student focus groups indicate that a more elaborate explanation is necessary. I believe that the University should develop a clearer and more comprehensive rationale for the GSP and communicate it to entire university community. In this manner the program will have a greater value to the students and perhaps will aid some individuals in their course selection. A fuller rationale will also assist the University's efforts to assess the program (see Part VII. Assessment of the GSP, pp. 19-20).

The rationale should address several questions in three key areas. In some instances this will not be an initial consideration, but a re-examination of critical issues:

1. **purpose:** how does the program provide a liberal education? What is even meant by "liberal education?" Why is a broad array of courses appropriate? What is the relationship between the program and students' majors?
2. **structure:** why is the GSP composed of eight parallel categories? What is their relationship to one another? Should students be making connections between the subject matter taught in classes that reside in different area?
3. **student learning outcomes:** what are the skills, proficiencies, and characteristics students will exhibit once they have completed the GSP? Beyond being introduced to the subject matter of a given disciplines, how will a student benefit from studying in a given field or discipline?

I encourage the University to develop a more comprehensive and explicit rationale for the GSP. It strikes me that the General Studies Council, since it is charged with overseeing the general education program and because its members are drawn from all four university colleges, should be the body to address this issue. The deliberations of the Council on this matter should include significant input from the students, staff, and

administration. Hopefully this dialogue will extend out of the committee and into the entire faculty. Certainly many of the faculty members with whom I have talked have strong views on many of these matters. Once rationales for the GSP and its constituent elements have been determined, it is important to publicize this information throughout the university community. The rationale for the program should be made available in the undergraduate catalog and it should be prominently displayed on the University's web site.

I also encourage the faculty of each department to identify for student majors how the GSP provides a foundation for the study-in-depth of their major program. Since advisors in these programs should be responsible for helping their advisees realize the importance of a liberal education, so they must be prepared to talk about these issues (see Part VIII. Advising in the GSP, pp. 20-22). Instructors of GSP classes should also be encouraged to communicate to their students how their course provides the knowledge and academic skills the program hopes to engender.

2. Structure of the GSP: Modification

Recommendation #2: the University should make several immediate modifications to the General Studies Program that will enhance student learning.

Although the GSP has served the University well for more than a decade, I feel that some modest changes should be immediately made. I have arrived at none of these observations on my own: the UNK review team and the majority of individuals with whom I spoke supported these changes as well. After each recommendation I have attached a brief explanation. The suggestions include:

1. *requiring students to complete English 101 and 102 during the first two years.* Since all academic areas utilize writing and expect that their students should be able to write at a reasonably proficient level, the two composition classes should be completed early in a student's academic career. The expectation that students should complete their mathematical requirement during their freshman year acts as a precedent. During my visit I found universal support for the implementation of this requirement, although representatives from the English department admitted that some significant logistical issues would have to be addressed.
2. *adding foreign language as a strand of the Humanities category.* A large number of the faculty with whom I spoke felt that the University should do more to encourage students to take a foreign language. From my perspective this is an admirable desire entirely in the tradition of a liberal education. The present instantiation of the GSP permits students to take a foreign language class as an elective or as a substitute for ENG 102, but I urge the University to place foreign

language more within the mainstream of the program. This can be most easily accomplished by placing it in the Humanities category.

3. *encouraging departments to limit the size of their classes.* The evidence of the student focus groups strongly suggests that class size was a critical factor in their satisfaction with a GSP class. Students enrolled in large classes tended to feel that that the learning was not effective; conversely, students were much more likely to value classes in which faculty could easily interact with them. Although the class sizes at UNK tend to be smaller than some of the comparable classes I have seen at other institutions, a few of the courses have such large enrollments that it is difficult for the instructor to interact with students in a meaningful way.
4. *adding upper level courses to the GSP.* Even though the current rationale for the GSP does not prevent upper level courses from fulfilling requirements, only two 300 or higher level courses are incorporated in the program (PHIL 360GS "Philosophy of Science" and BIOL 315GS "Human Ecology"). Why is this so? One of the benefits of a "distribution" general education program is that students are able to choose from a variety of course offerings instead of being restricted to a single general survey class. I believe that students will be more likely to be challenged and intellectually engaged in their GSP classes if they are able to select upper level classes. Presumably most students would prefer to take 100 and 200 level classes to meet their general education requirements, but other students will appreciate the opportunity to engage in more advanced course work. When I talked with students at UNK I heard anecdotal evidence that some individuals view the GSP as a review of high school course work because many classes examine the same material they studied in high school. The University could address this issue by providing additional upper level course options for students.
5. *encouraging faculty to make connections between their GSP courses and classes in other academic disciplines.* One of the key findings of the student focus group project and the survey of the alumni is that students view many of the GSP classes as the "first step" in the sequence of major program. The respondents felt that they would find the GSP to be more valuable if the courses took more of the form of broad surveys that made connections to multiple academic disciplines. One way to combat this perception is for faculty members to structure their GSP classes in such a way that they can assist students in seeing subject matter and methodologies shared by multiple disciplines. This blurring of disciplinary boundaries fits comfortably within the traditions of a liberal education.

6. *resolving the future of Category VIII: Capstone Course* For approximately ten years the "Capstone Course" has been an element of the GSP, but no sections of this class have ever been proposed or taught. The idea of such a class, in which students make connections among multiple academic areas through multidisciplinary or interdisciplinary activities, is wonderful, but it poses some significant logistical problems. Because these classes fall outside the conventional governance structure of a university (i.e., academic departments), they are very difficult to support. From my understanding, UNK's failure to act on this matter is due to several academic factors, including an uncertainty among the faculty and administration over what the form and purpose of this class should be; the secondary management issues, such as staffing and financing, appear also to be undecided. The University should act now to resolve this situation. If the faculty and administration view a capstone class as vital to the interests of student learning in the GSP, they should commit themselves to determining the form and purpose of this class in the near future.

3. Structure of the GSP: Issues to be Studied

Recommendation #3: the University should engage in a dialogue to consider several elements of the General Studies Program.

In addition to the modifications I have suggested in Part II above, I wish to identify several issues for the University to consider. From all my conversations with members of the UNK's community, I did not find a consensus on several key factors relating to the general education program. I have my own opinions regarding many of these items, but the UNK faculty itself, in whom the ultimate responsibility for the curriculum is placed, should try to achieve consensus regarding these points. It seems that the General Studies Council, which includes representation from all four University colleges, would be a logical venue for this discussion. I pose each of these points in the form of a question with a brief explanation attached. The issues include:

1. *is a liberal education best achieved via a small number of courses focusing on the most fundamental aspects of academic disciplines? Or is a liberal education more likely to be realized by offering students multiple options to meet the individual GSP requirements?* Traditional western notions of higher education, especially prior to the second half of the 20th century, have tended to focus on introducing students to the "great works" on which western culture resides. After all, the argument goes, how can anyone claim to be an educated person in the western world if s/he is unfamiliar with the works and activities of Homer, Thucydides, Plato, Virgil, St. Augustine, Dante, Shakespeare, Locke, Kant, Marx, Darwin, Nietzsche, Freud, and Einstein? However, much has changed since the Second

World War as the student body has become more reflective of our pluralistic society. The backgrounds and interests of the students at the beginning of the 21st century are very different from those who entered universities a century ago. The University should ask itself how it could provide a rigorous liberal education that will best serve the interests of the students. The results of this discussion are highly unlikely to satisfy all, for there will be little chance for consensus. From my observations on the UNK campus, it became obvious that each side enjoys the passionate support of many faculty members.

2. *why is philosophy the sole discipline within the Humanities category that students may avoid?* Students are currently required to complete Humanities' course work in literature, aesthetics, and history -- but not in philosophy. What are the justifications for marginalizing philosophy in this manner? Historically philosophy has played a crucial role in a liberal education, and so the University's decision to assign it a secondary status confuses me and, I presume, other outside observers. Perhaps the University has a valid curricular explanation for requiring coursework in several areas of the humanities and excluding work in one, but no justification appears anywhere in the GSP. At the very least the University should include an explanation in the GSP as to why it has decided to treat disciplines differently in this category. A more ambitious approach would be for the institution to re-evaluate the manner in which students are required to complete the humanities category: is it necessary for the University to prescribe any course work here, other than ensuring that students take classes in at least three separate categories?

3. *why is economics the sole discipline within the Social and Behavioral Sciences category that students may **not** avoid?* Students are given much freedom in the way that they may distribute their nine required hours in the Social and Behavioral Sciences; if they arrange their hours carefully, students may even avoid taking classes in three of four areas (i.e., Sociology, Political Science, Geography, and "Behavioral Perspectives"). However, every UNK undergraduate must complete a class in economics. What are the justifications for privileging economics in this manner? As I noted above in my comments about philosophy, perhaps the University has a valid curricular explanation for the structure of this category, but no justification appears anywhere in the GSP for maintaining that one discipline should enjoy a special status among the social and behavioral sciences. I suggest that the institution either attach an explanation to the GSP for why disciplines in the Social and Behavioral Sciences category have different statuses or re-evaluate the structure of this area.

4. *why are the structures of the Humanities and Social and Behavioral Sciences categories different?* On a related note to points #2 and 3 above, why are choices in Humanities prescribed, but not so in the Social and Behavioral Sciences category? I urge the University to achieve some sort of consistency here.
5. *why are most of the GSP categories arranged according to "perspectives," but the Natural Sciences category is structured by "department?"* With little difficulty the Natural Sciences category could be subdivided into a "Life Sciences Perspective" and a "Physical Sciences Perspective." This change, of course, would potentially affect student enrollment patterns, so I realize that such a modification could carry unwanted consequences. However, I encourage the faculty to consider alternatives to the departmental arrangement of the Natural Sciences category.
6. *why is the historical perspective considered part of the Humanities category when the Department of History is housed in the College of Natural and Social Sciences? Why is the economic perspective considered part of the Social and Behavioral Sciences category when the Department of Economics is housed in the College of Business and Technology?* Perhaps the placement of these two academic "perspectives" in their respective GSP categories does not concern the faculty and administration. Nevertheless, they may cause confusion for students.
7. *why are some areas of the GSP under the control of a specific department while others are not?* Currently a single department services most areas of the GSP; the exceptions are the perspectives of aesthetics, social, and behavioral. Yet there are several other areas in the GSP that may logically be fulfilled with coursework from a variety of academic departments. Is there any reason to prevent this? For example, may faculty members in the Department of Art and Art History submit their courses to fulfill the historical perspectives element in the Humanities category? May members of the Modern Languages faculty bring forth the German and French civilization classes to do the same? Or is the opposite desirable: should only members of the History department be allowed to teach classes that meet this GSP requirement? Furthermore, if the University concludes that courses from any department may fulfill the historical perspective element, does the History department faculty retain the right to review and approve these courses? I urge the University to address these questions.

4. Governance of the GSP: Director

Recommendation #4: *the University should appoint a faculty member as the Director of the General Studies Program. Secondly, the University should provide some funding to this office in order to support initiatives that will benefit the GSP.*

The GSP has enjoyed a series of capable directors over the last several years and this has resulted in a strong program. Because of the broad scope of the GSP and the considerable number of governance issues that arise, it is desirable to continue the practice of appointing a Director of the General Studies Program. The Director has the opportunity to enhance greatly the student-learning opportunities in the GSP. For instance, on several occasions during my visit faculty members told me of the efforts by Alan Jenkins, in his capacity as Director of the General Studies Program several years ago, to convince faculty to develop or refine pre-existing courses that would meet the writing-intensive requirement. I congratulate Dr. Jenkins on his hard work, for these classes do much to complement the liberal arts education at UNK.

The director should be a senior member of the UNK faculty who already has considerable familiarity with and experience in teaching GSP courses. It is desirable for the position to be full-time; if the position is not designated as full-time, the director should teach no more than one course, preferably in the GSP. Because the responsibilities of the position are several and may take some time to master, the director should be hired with the expectation that s/he will serve in this capacity for a multiple year period (e.g., three years).

The responsibilities for the position should include:

1. providing assistance to the GSP Council;
2. overseeing the assessment of the GSP;
3. serving as a resource for advising in the GSP (see **Part VIII. Advising in the GSP**, pp. 20-22);
4. assisting faculty who propose courses to fulfill GSP requirements;
5. soliciting writing-intensive and cultural-diversity courses from the faculty; and
6. overseeing discussion of the future of "Category VIII: Capstone Course" (see above, Part II. Structure of the GSP: Modifications, pp. 9-11). If the University does implement a Capstone Requirement, the Director should oversee this aspect of the GSP.

The University should also try to provide some funds for the Director to finance initiatives that will enhance the GSP. These projects would potentially include professional development opportunities (e.g., working with faculty to enhance interdisciplinary elements in their classes); workshops on creating course proposals to fulfill specific GSP requirements; training in assessment procedures; and advising. Because of the important duties associated with the director, the individual who fills this position must be able to go beyond the role of a manager and take a leading role in initiating these activities.

5. Governance of the GSP: General Studies Council

***Recommendation #5:** the University should restructure the membership and procedures of the General Studies Council in order to emphasize faculty ownership of the general education curriculum.*

Over the last several years, the General Studies Council (GSC), working closely with the Director of the GSP, has been responsible for the administration of the GSP. The responsibilities of the council are very significant, for its actions affect virtually all UNK undergraduates. The faculty also has a considerable interest in the activities of the GSC. In addition to their traditional role as "owners of the curriculum," faculty members teach the classes that the GSC judges appropriate or inappropriate for the program **and** they depend on the program to provide a foundation in the liberal arts for students that will major in their programs. During my visit to the UNK campus, I did not hear a single person disagree with these principles; rather, I heard them repeated in various forms over the two days I spent on campus.

Past and present members of the GSC should be congratulated for their efforts: by all accounts the GSP offers students a rigorous liberal education, and the GSC has been greatly responsible for this success. However, I repeatedly heard comments that in recent years the GSC has not been able to respond to faculty concerns in an efficient manner. The issues that arose most consistently dealt with (1) uncertainty about the way in which changes to the GSP could be made (see **Part VI. Governance of the GSP: Approval Process**, pp. 17-18 for a discussion of this issue); (2) claims that the GSC was unduly influenced by *ex officio* members who prevented any meaningful change to or

examination of the GSP; and (3) a belief that the faculty members serving on the GSC were often junior members of the faculty uncertain of their role on the council.

These issues concern me greatly. Since I have had only a limited time to familiarize myself with the GSC and its many activities, it is hard for me to evaluate these claims. However, I must reiterate that I heard them expressed on several occasions in public and private settings. Based on these concerns and my personal observations, I recommend that the University restructure the membership of the GSC in order to enhance the faculty's ownership of the general education program:

1. the GSC should be comprised of eleven voting members and one non-voting *ex officio* member (however, see point #5 below):
 - a. each of the four colleges should provide two voting members. Preferably these two individuals will come from different departments and areas (e.g., for the College of Natural and Social Sciences, one should come from the social sciences and the other from the natural sciences);
 - b. two students should serve as voting members;
 - c. a representative from the library should serve as a voting member; and
 - d. the Registrar should serve as an *ex officio* non-voting member.
2. faculty members should be elected by their respective colleges for a set term of two years; in each college these terms should be staggered, so every year a college will have a junior and senior member;
3. preferably all faculty representatives will be senior members who teach in the GSP; and
4. University departments and colleges should consider a faculty person's membership on the GSC as significant university service in promotion and tenure decisions.

In addition to these steps above, I also suggest that the University consider an additional point:

5. expand the number of faculty members on the GSC so that the council will be more representative of the faculty body.

Because the departments of three of the colleges are distinct, effective representation on the GSC is difficult to achieve. If, on the other hand, the GSC were restructured to include three or four members from each college, with the understanding that no one department would provide more than a single representative, faculty interests and departmental perspectives would be better reflected. I believe that it is important, however, that each college retain equal representation on the GSC.

6. Governance of the GSP: Approval Process

Recommendation #6: *the University should clarify and publicize the approval process by which changes to the General Studies Program may be proposed and made.*

On several occasions during my visit I heard faculty members express frustration with the procedures by which classes are proposed to fulfill requirements in the GSP. These comments extended from concerns that the various steps of approval process were not well publicized to a belief that the General Studies Council has changed the voting process from year to year or even from meeting to meeting to suit their immediate interests. One individual even felt that the administration was deliberately encouraging the Council to do this in order to prevent faculty members from submitting new courses. A second issue expressed by faculty members dealt with the jurisdiction of the GSC over writing intensive and cultural diversity course proposals. Technically these two requirements are not part of the GSP, yet the GSC has been voting on them.

What concerned me the most about the approval process for GSP courses, however, is the effect the lack of well-publicized procedures. If the faculty views the approval process for course submissions as secretive, inconsistent, or Byzantine, they may become cynical and feel that they have little ownership of the general education program. Consequently, I urge the University to take immediate action to identify and publicize the procedures (1) by which courses may be added to or removed from the GSP and (2) by which changes to the structure of the GSP itself may be initiated and made. The Faculty Senate, acting in concert with the administration, should identify these appropriate procedures. This information should be of such detail that it is clear to any faculty member what actions s/he must take in order to initiate a proposal to add a course to the GSP.

Furthermore, the voting procedures of the General Studies Council should be clarified and publicized. I heard a variety of explanations for what constitutes a vote of approval (e.g., one person claimed that it was a bare majority of the eight faculty members; another person said that six faculty members had to vote in favor of a measure; another person said a majority of GSC members present was required; another person said that three of the four colleges must support a course proposal in order to approve it). Even if my suggested changes to the membership of the GSC are not adopted (see above, Part V. Governance of the GSP: General Studies Council, pp. 15-17), I hope that the University will see fit to review and clarify the Council's voting procedures.

As a final recommendation regarding the GSC, I suggest that the University clarify the Council's jurisdiction over writing intensive and cultural diversity courses. Since these

classes are not part of the GSP, why has the GSC been examining them? No one that I talked to understood why they were brought before the GSC. Secondly, if the University determines that these two curricular features have become *de facto* elements of the GSP, is it really necessary for the entire GSC to approve new submissions? Could some other committee or person approve these proposals? For instance, is it desirable to assign the task of examining and approving writing intensive and cultural diversity courses to the Director of the GSP? This approach would give the GSC the time necessary to consider some of the larger policy issues I have identified throughout this review.

7. Assessment of the GSP

Recommendation #7: *the University should design a plan to assess the General Studies Program. Secondly, the University should identify and implement specific instruments by which it will evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of the General Studies Program.*

One of the greatest transformations in higher education over the last twenty years has been the emphasis placed on assessment. Even within the last decade the importance of assessment in matters of accreditation has increased significantly. However, an interest in assessment extends far beyond the practical issues such as accreditation and accountability to the stakeholders of a university. Above all, a culture of assessment demonstrates a commitment to identifying and correcting problem areas in the curriculum. Lying at the heart of any assessment of the general education curriculum should be an ethos of self-reflection that will allow the institution to measure and improve the effectiveness of student learning in each of the eight GSP categories.

I encourage the University to identify a variety of quantitative and qualitative measures by which it will undertake this task. For instance, UNK may decide to use quantitative measurements such as student achievement on nationally-normed exams and indicators of student attitudes. Many qualitative instruments are also available, including focus groups and interviews of individual students; graduation and/or GSP portfolios; and surveys of alumni and employers. Because the quantitative and qualitative measures provide different types of data, the University should adopt a mixture of the two instead of relying exclusively on just one type of instrument.

Already the Faculty Senate has taken some initial steps by appointing a subcommittee to consider how the GSP should be assessed and to identify appropriate assessment instruments. Fortunately there are many organizations and resources that will aid its efforts. Several associations, such as the **American Association for Higher Education (AAHE)** (<http://www.aahe.org/>), sponsor workshops and conferences that consider multiple issues in assessment. Other organizations, such as the **Council for Higher Education Accreditation** (<http://www.chea.org/>), provide information for specific applications and uses of assessment data. The growth of the World Wide Web has led to the appearance of web sites that provide much information, such as the **ERIC Clearinghouse on Assessment and Evaluation** (<http://ericae.net>). I also believe that the University should contact peer institutions in order to share resources and to learn from their experiences.

Finally, the University should also establish a policy regarding its assessment of individual classes in the GSP. Because the periodic review of GSP classes would entail a significant commitment of faculty and administrative time, UNK should determine what is appropriate for its campus. In order to spark a dialogue, I pose several key questions that must be answered:

1. once a class has been approved to fulfill the requirements of a specific area of the GSP, will its suitability ever be reviewed again?
2. if the University decides to review its list of previously approved GSP classes periodically, who will undertake this effort? the General Studies Council? individual academic departments? the assessment committee itself?
3. how often should this review take place?

8. Advising in the GSP

Recommendation #8: *the University should emphasize the importance of advising in the General Studies Program.*

The student focus groups expressed concern with the quality of advising students were receiving for the GSP curriculum. Several of the students, faculty members, and staff members with whom I spoke felt that some advisors were causing students to devalue the objectives of the GSP by telling them that it did not matter which class they took to fulfill a requirement. Some individuals felt that poor advising resulted in students having to take more than 45 hours in order to finish the program. Certainly the flexibility of the program, which allows students some choice in the classes they take, can cause confusion. Furthermore, because some programs require specific courses within the GSP for their majors, inadequate planning may cause some students to take more than the minimum of 45 hours. Students who change from one major to another may discover that they need to take some classes even though they had completed the GSP requirements as identified by their original major. Finally, students and faculty members with whom I talked observed that students who were trying to transfer in credit for writing intensive and cultural diversity classes met with special difficulties. Since most UNK undergraduates complete these elements as part of their GSP, students who transfer in with AA degrees need to rely on their major programs to provide this coursework. If their programs do not provide sufficient opportunities for these classes, transfer students often have to take "extra" GSP courses to complete the minimum number of writing intensive and cultural diversity classes.

This final issue lies primarily outside the scope of advising (it will be addressed only by major programs providing more writing intensive and cultural diversity classes). However, several steps could be taken to address student concerns with advising. First, the faculty and students should be encouraged to take advantage of the support of the Academic Advising Center. I met with its director, Mary Daake, and I was impressed by her willingness to provide assistance to advisors. She recognized the need for advisors to go beyond answering questions students may have about their semester schedules: advisors should also assist students in making connections between the GSP and their

major programs. To a very great degree advisors are responsible for helping students make meaning of their entire undergraduate experience.

Secondly, each department should consider the means by which it can assess whether students are making timely progress through the GSP. Some departments may choose to adopt checklists, while others may prefer flow charts to ensure an appropriate sequencing of classes. Still other departments may identify a four-year schedule for each advisee and indicate which GSP areas should be completed each semester. Some UNK departments have already been practicing one of these procedures for a long time and they will be able to serve as models for other departments to emulate. I suspect that some of the "poor" advising identified by students is due to the disparity of advising practices among the academic disciplines. Once the University adopts some expectations for advising and establishes a general consistency among the departments, I believe that students will be more satisfied with the advising they receive.

Finally, I also recommend that each department identify one individual who will accept special advising responsibilities. This individual will be the designated "expert" to whom other departmental advisors may direct questions about the GSP. This individual will also serve as liaison between his/her academic discipline and the Academic Advising Center and the Director of the General Studies Program.

9. Name of the GSP

Recommendation #9: *the University should reconsider the name of the General Studies Program.*

Several faculty members were concerned that the name "General Studies Program" inadequately describes the content and intent of the University's general educational curriculum. Furthermore, they hypothesized, this non-descriptive name may lead many members of the UNK community, including students and faculty, to devalue the program. Other individuals noted that the name of the program is similar to the major in General Studies and that this has led to confusion among students. My own feeling is that the title carries a connotation of "generic" and does not adequately express the significant role the GSP plays on the UNK campus. Consequently, I encourage the University to consider changing the name of the GSP to reflect better the important liberal education goals of the program.

Several possibilities were mentioned during my visit:

1. Liberal Studies Program
2. Liberal Arts Program
3. Undergraduate Curriculum
4. General Education Program
5. Studies in the Liberal Arts
6. Liberal Arts and Sciences Curriculum

- Concluding Remarks

Concluding Remarks

In closing I wish to commend the University faculty and administration for the assistance they provided me in reviewing the GSP. The nine faculty members of the review team presented the perspectives of their individual colleges; in doing so, they represented their interests in a collegial fashion, yet they were able to "step back" and consider the larger picture of the institution. The representative from the library, Mary Barton, was very helpful in providing the perceptions of the staff. The entire University community should be proud of the efforts of the three student members on the review team: they stand as fine representatives of the student body. I also wish to acknowledge the assistance of Dr. Ken Nikels, Dean of Graduate Studies and Research, and Dr. Charles Bicak, Professor of Biology, who coordinated many of my efforts and made the entire review process a productive and enjoyable experience.

The insights and suggestions of the entire review team are incorporated into this report whenever possible. Some individuals may disagree with some of my specific observations and suggestions, but on most of the issues I have identified in the report, the team was able to achieve a consensus. I also tried to address the opinions and concerns that were expressed to me by the many faculty members and administrators with whom I spoke. As I constructed this report it quickly became apparent that I would be able to respond to all the comments that I received. As an alternative I have tried to address the underlying issues that I perceived to be the source for the remarks I heard.

I encourage the University to continue emphasizing the importance of its general education program. The GSP, in its present incarnation, provides a rigorous and challenging curriculum; the University is accurate when it characterizes the program as an "extensive general studies curriculum that emphasizes the liberal arts." Just as important to the success of UNK's general education curriculum, however, is the dedication that the faculty has shown for supporting the program. The passion with which the faculty members presented their views about the GSP and its many elements indicated to me that they care very deeply about the educational experience their students receive. UNK undergraduates are fortunate to have such a talented and dedicated group of individuals who teach in the GSP.

Finally, I encourage the University not to "rest on its laurels." Students and faculty have provided a consistent message that student learning could be enhanced by addressing several areas of the program; new concerns, such as the growing importance of assessment in accreditation matters, demands that University make some modifications to the GSP. In addition to the recommendations I have made in this report, I have also identified several areas of discussion that merit further consideration and discussion by the University community. I encourage the faculty and administration to engage in an open dialogue to address these issues.

Respectfully submitted,

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