

General Studies Renewal FAQs

FAQ: Purpose of General Studies

What is the purpose of the General Studies program?

The General Studies program helps students acquire knowledge and abilities to understand the world, make connections across disciplines, and contribute to the solution of contemporary problems. General education should develop skills needed for later academic and professional work (such as communication and math), foster abilities that transcend disciplines (like critical thinking), and help students understand different disciplines and their unique approaches to asking and answering life's questions.

Why do students have to take liberal arts courses rather than just focus on their major?

The broadly educated person can view things holistically. S/he is valued in society because s/he has become skillful in analyzing competing methodologies and schools of thought in finding solutions to real world problems. A liberal arts education gives learners the opportunity to view the world from multiple perspectives.

FAQ: Meeting NCA Guidelines

What is NCA and what do they do?

The North Central Association of Colleges and Schools is one of six regional institutional accreditors recognized by the U.S. Department of Education. It accredits degree-granting institutions in 19 states, including Nebraska. If NCA removes accreditation from an institution, students cannot use federal financial aid to enroll. Professional accreditations (such as AACSB in business) are revoked. The loss of prestige resulting from disaccreditation is severe. UNK's last evaluation by NCA was in 2004, at which time NCA found cause to schedule a follow up (or "focused") visit because of weaknesses in our General Studies program. As an institution, UNK is at the last step before disaccreditation because of the General Studies program.

Why did we get a negative report from NCA about General Studies?

NCA found that UNK doesn't have a "clear, shared definition and understanding of the learning outcomes" for General Studies. It also found that our current program is not a coherent program of study, but rather a collection of courses. It is impossible to retrofit NCA required assessment practices onto an existing, cafeteria style program. The renewed program has to be more coherent and intentional; there needs to be a progression in difficulty of learning levels from courses at the beginning of the program (composition, math, etc.) to the Capstone course at the end.

Can NCA tell us what our General Studies curriculum should be?

No. NCA's role is to judge the effectiveness of our assessment practices and the overall integrity of the program. Where there are deficiencies, NCA cites them. Like many other institutions, UNK has a General Studies curriculum that was never intended to function as a program. Rather, it is a set of many individual courses from which students can choose. Current assessment practices –required by NCA– cannot be retrofitted onto our existing program. While our current General Studies program represented the sound thinking of its time, assessment results today clearly show that there are better ways to bring about student learning. To respond to NCA's requirements, UNK must also renew its General Studies curriculum.

What could happen if UNK doesn't pass the next NCA visit?

A focused visit, which UNK had in 2008, is the last step before an institution loses accreditation. NCA has disaccredited institutions. Losing accreditation means that students cannot use any federal financial aid (Pell grants, loans, etc.) at UNK, and all professional accreditations (such as AACSB in business) are revoked.

FAQ: Advantages of a New Program

What advantage will students have from a new General Studies program?

Students will benefit greatly from taking a coherent, unified program which has clear, agreed upon learning outcomes. By the end of the student's General Studies experience, s/he will know the purpose and appreciate having a broad general education.

What will be the advantage to faculty and departments of a new General Studies program?

Departments and programs will be able to develop innovative, academically enriching courses. The Portal and Capstone courses especially will allow faculty to use their creativity and to explore intellectual fields they might not otherwise get to. Also, departments and programs will have increased access to offer General Studies courses, particularly in the Portal and Capstone areas.

FAQ: Guiding Principles and Practices

What are the recognized "best practices" today in general education?

General education programs should have a discernable beginning, middle, and end. This allows students to progress over time in their cognitive skills. Earlier courses may put more emphasis on memorizing and comprehending, but later courses should emphasize higher level learning skills: analysis, synthesis, and evaluation. Other best practices today include having a Portal course, which fosters critical thinking skills early on, as well as a Capstone, which requires students to demonstrate their competence in higher level critical thinking skills.

Did UNK consider successful general education models at other universities?

Both the Roundtable and the General Studies Council looked at numerous samples of general education programs. Included in these samples were 20+ programs considered by the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AACU) to be “promising models” that represent best practices. The focus of the General Studies Council is to create a program that reflects national best practices, aligns with UNK’s mission statement and strategic plan, and supports the best traditions of a UNK general education.

Is the proposed curriculum the same one from the Roundtable?

The model that the General Studies Council is currently working with is largely informed by the Roundtable. The Roundtable included approximately 40 faculty colleagues from all colleges and the library, at all ranks and lengths of service.

How does First Year Experience fit in with the proposed General Studies program?

The First Year Experience (FYE) program will be on hiatus during 2009-2010 while UNK reevaluates the mission and scope of the program. The proposed curriculum seeks include some effective FYE practices that will help students understand the purpose of possessing a general education.

FAQ: Curriculum

What are the General Studies requirements in the new program?

Each student will complete 12 credit hours of Foundational Core – writing, math, speech, and a course in the category "Democracy in Perspective." In addition, all students take a Portal course and Capstone course, and 27 credit hours in the disciplines. After students take the minimum requirements in the disciplines, there are 5 hours of elective General Studies credit.

Isn't the proposed model the same as the existing program?

There are similarities and differences. The proposed model is intentional about helping students progress from lower level to higher level learning. Also, the proposed program has more balanced category requirements – 1 course in fine arts, 2 in humanities, 2 in the sciences, 2 in the social sciences. In addition, the proposed program makes the Capstone a requirement and adds a Portal course.

What is the purpose of the Portal course?

The Portal is taken early the student’s general education and focuses on building critical thinking skills. Students learn that there are contrasting interpretations and methodologies within disciplines, and to engage in sustained thought about issues.

What is the purpose of the Capstone course?

The Capstone concludes the General Studies experience. It requires students to evaluate and synthesize information from more than one academic discipline, and to employ appropriate methodologies in creating an original semester project.

Why does the proposed program require less English composition than the existing program when our students already have a hard time with writing?

The Roundtable discussions, which included members of the English faculty, concluded that requiring one semester of English composition is adequate as long as writing is incorporated into other areas of the General Studies curriculum. The current proposal includes intensive writing in the Portal and/or Capstone courses.

What is the proposed “Math for the Educated Person” course?

The Roundtable recommended that a math course be created that encompasses mathematical concepts that the educated person needs to know, including principles of numbers, statistics, graphs, and critical evaluation of the information they convey. For students in majors (such as business and science) that require advanced mathematics and who need to stay in sequence, college algebra would also fill the math requirement.

Why isn't economics a requirement under the proposed program?

Economics is in the social sciences category and would be an option for students. Further, Portal and Capstone courses can be created and taught in economics.

Why is the General Studies program 45 credit hours? Why can't it be fewer?

Forty-five hours represents about a third of the credit hours in the bachelor degree. This ratio is common in general education practices at most institutions.

FAQ: Assessment

What assessment practices does NCA require for General Studies?

The General Studies program has to demonstrate that it meets the overall program learning outcomes (evaluating information, thinking critically, communicating clearly, understand diversity). It does so using a variety of instruments, such as the nationally normed CAAP test of critical thinking and writing.

What kind of assessment will departments have to do?

Any course in a General Studies category will have to meet the learning outcomes for that category, and will have to follow the assessment procedures specified by the General Studies Council. These include teaching the course so that it meets the learning outcomes for the category the course is in, and using common assessment instruments (from the General Studies

Council) for that category. These NCA-required practices help ensure that students are learning what they should be.

Why will we have to use the same standardized instruments?

For assessment to be valid, a common instrument has to be used. If departments each assess the General Studies courses they offer in different ways, there is no way to compare how well students are learning.

How often will my department have to do assessment of General Studies courses we teach?

Fortunately, the intensive level of department involvement in assessment of General Studies will be reduced quite a bit. Very few courses will have to be assessed each year. Rather, there will be a schedule based on a three-year rotation. The reduced assessment load is contingent, however, on whether the renewed program is implemented.

Doesn't having common learning outcomes and assessment instruments violate academic freedom?

The General Studies program has always had required learning outcomes. NCA (and best practices) now mandate common assessment instruments as well. Any General Studies course will have to meet the learning outcomes and assess using the common assessment instruments. How the instructor meets the learning outcomes of the course, what materials s/he uses, and what teaching practices s/he employs is entirely up to the instructor's judgment. Thus, academic freedom is in no way restricted by NCA requirements or by the policies of the General Studies program.

FAQ: Renewal Process

Why is the General Studies Council focusing on this particular curriculum model?

It is a combination of the Roundtable recommendations, NCA requirements, identified best practices in general education, and elements of other models proposed by UNK faculty.

Can't UNK just put existing General Studies courses into the new categories?

There will be new categories that will have learning outcomes that are different from the existing ones. The revising of learning outcomes is necessary because of NCA requirements.

What is the approval process for a new General Studies program?

The process of renewing General Studies began in fall 2005 with Roundtable Phase I, and continues with the work of the General Studies Council presently. Approving a renewed program follows the procedures in the General Studies Governance Document.

What will be the approval process for new General Studies course submissions?

To submit a course for approval as General Studies, departments will follow the procedures in the General Studies Governance Document, Section V.

What things have to happen in order to have a new General Studies program?

The General Studies Council will fulfill its charge by articulating learning outcomes, a renewed curriculum, and related assessment practices. To do so, the Council will continue to consult with each of the colleges and with the general faculty. Input from the whole academic community is critical to ensuring a high quality, broadly supported new program.

What if one or more of the colleges votes “no”?

Under the General Studies Governance Document, three of the four colleges must approve the renewed program. If more than one college voted against the program, the General Studies Council would seek every possible means to resolve the concerns.

Do I have any say in renewing the General Studies program, or is it a “done deal”?

Changing the General Studies learning outcomes, assessment practices, and curriculum are a necessity because of NCA requirements. Because of the magnitude and importance of changing General Studies, there has been a long period (over four years) of discussion, meetings, presentations, forums, etc. about it. Over 60 faculty from the Roundtables and the General Studies Council have been involved so far, and they were charged to convey the views of their colleagues to the Roundtable and Council. Faculty will continue to have opportunities to convey their views and suggestions about the proposed General Studies curriculum and assessment plans before they are finalized. Afterwards, the faculty in each college will vote on whether to accept the renewed curriculum.

What would happen if the General Studies renewal effort isn’t successful?

Because of the dire consequences for UNK’s accreditation, retaining the current General Studies program that has already been cited twice by NCA is not an option. NCA requirements will be met.

FAQ: Timeline & Communication

What’s the timeline for everything that has to happen in General Studies?

The new learning outcomes and renewed General Studies curriculum will be presented to faculty in spring 2009. Academic year 2009-2010 will be the time for departments to submit General Studies course proposals and for the Council to review them. The first students under the new program would begin in fall 2010, and the report to NCA is due that spring (2011).

Is it a good idea to do this now, considering the current fiscal situation?

NCA has mandated that we make these changes, and national best practices and our own assessment data show clearly the need for a renewal of the General Studies program. It is anticipated that the renewed program will not have a negative financial impact on the institution.

Why haven't I heard about this before now?

Communication about the renewal process has been frequent and comprehensive. Since the Roundtables began in fall 2005, information about the General Studies renewal process has been communicated via email, newsletter, website, Blackboard, seminars, and forums across campus. Over 40 faculty from across the colleges and the library have participated in the Roundtable, and over 20 faculty from across the colleges and the library have served on the General Studies Council during this time. Information about the process has been offered continuously over the past four years by the General Studies Council, Council, the Office of Assessment, the Center for Teaching Excellence, and the Senior Vice Chancellor.

FAQ: Questions from Departments

Will departments still get to design the curriculum for General Studies courses they teach?

Departments proposing a course for inclusion in General Studies will continue to have the same academic freedom they have always had. However, each category in General Studies will have a set of learning outcomes that any course in that category must meet. How the course meets those learning outcomes is up to the faculty member teaching it. Additionally, each category will have common assessment instruments to ensure validity in assessment practices. Common learning outcomes and common assessment instruments are required by NCA. Training in learning outcomes and assessment instruments will be offered to faculty.

What if our department relies on enrollments in General Studies courses we teach?

In creating the proposed curriculum, the General Studies Council sought to comply with NCA requirements and provide a balanced, effective learning experience for students. The Portal and Capstone courses are two excellent opportunities for departments to offer courses in General Studies. Any course may be designated a Portal course, as long as it meets the outcomes and assesses using the common Portal assessment instrument. Similarly, departments can offer Capstone courses if they meet the learning outcomes and use the assessment instrument for the Capstone.

What help will departments have in preparing and submitting proposals for General Studies courses?

The General Studies Council will offer information seminars for faculty to help in preparing and submitting proposals.

Do departments need to be doing anything right now to prepare?

Faculty will participate widely as the whole campus considers the proposed outcomes, assessment instruments, and curriculum. When a renewed program is approved, departments will be able to submit course proposals, initially during the 2009-2010 year timeframe. The Council will then review and approve courses. All courses (including those in the current program) will need to be reviewed for their alignment with the new learning outcomes and assessment practices.

FAQ: Implications for UNK

Will the renewed General Studies program transfer to community colleges and other four-year institutions?

Transferability was a major consideration in designing a new program, since UNK has many feeder institutions that send us students. The General Studies Council is working to ensure that a renewed program allows for ease of transfer both into and out of UNK.

How will UNK cover the extra sections of Portal courses that focus intensively on writing?

Until three years ago, UNK required six more hours of writing intensive coursework than it does now. Departments were able to provide that level of offerings then, and should be able to do so now. Also, the Portal and Capstone course will both allow departments with lower enrollments to have increased participation in General Studies, since Portal and Capstone courses may be taken in any discipline.

Why do some of the colleges teach more courses in General Studies than others?

Because general education is based in traditional liberal arts, some colleges have courses that lend themselves more readily to participation in the General Studies program than others. However, in the proposed new program, departments and programs with little or no participation would have increased opportunities to be involved – particularly by designing and teaching Portal and Capstone courses.

Why can't each college at UNK have its own General Studies program?

Universities with multiple general education programs have experienced problems. Having multiple programs requires multiple administrative systems to oversee them, multiple academic program reviews, multiple assessment programs, and multiple evaluations by NCA. On a broader level, if a university says that their general education represents what every graduate should know, how can there be a different program required of students depending on what their major is? In light of best practices and assessment data, many institutions (such as UNL) are abandoning their multiple program system in favor of a single general education program.

FAQ: People Involved in Renewal

What is the General Studies Council and what does it do?

The General Studies Council consists of faculty representatives from each of the colleges and the library, and ex officio members from the offices of Assessment, Advising, and the Registrar. The Council reports to the Senior Vice Chancellor and is responsible for regulating and overseeing the General Studies program, including setting the learning outcomes, assessment practices, and curriculum.

Who is on the General Studies Council?

Current Council members are listed online.

What was the Roundtable and what did it do?

The Roundtable Phase I was organized by the Faculty Senate in Fall 2005 to study the existing General Studies program and articulate a set of learning goals for a renewed curriculum.

Roundtable Phase II began in spring 2007 and designed a curriculum based on learning goals from Phase I.

Who was on the Roundtables?

Roundtable Phase I participants are listed online.

Roundtable Phase II participants are listed online.

Whom do I contact when I have questions or want to comment about the proposal?

You can contact any member of the General Studies Council.