

Report of the Academic Program Review (APR) Team for General Studies at The University of Nebraska at Kearney, March 2022

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Executive Summary

The materials provided in the UNK General Studies self-study report, along with discussions with stakeholders during the site visit, reflect a quality program aligned with the broad institutional goals and mission of the University. Though only recently implemented, the new General Studies program appears to have been thoughtfully designed to serve the varied needs of UNK's diverse students while providing increased flexibility and coherence in UNK's general studies course offerings and requirements. Given the recent changes to the curriculum, including the reduction in required credits from 45 to 30-31, the Review Team focused its inquiry on the following core themes during conversation and discussion with campus stakeholders:

- Coherence and value
- Assessment
- Student, faculty, and staff experience
- First-year Experience (FYE) course design, implementation, and outcomes
- Governance of General Studies and campus communication

Among the most notable strengths of the program are:

- Committed, creative and engaged General Studies Council
- Broad, though not uniform, campus support for recent changes
- Rationale and justification for new LOPER requirements seemingly well-understood by faculty and students
- New General Studies curriculum provides more opportunities to accommodate the varied needs of students by providing space for additional academic minors, greater transfer of courses from other institutions, and more overall flexibility.

There are many points of pride and distinct strengths of the new General Studies curriculum, as well as several opportunities for continued growth to further improve the curriculum and distinguish UNK's program. The remainder of this report will elaborate on specific strengths and opportunities in the context of the broad themes identified above.

Strengths

Coherence and Value:

The change from a traditional distribution model of General Studies to one defined by distinct LOPER requirements has increased the clarity and purpose of this common part of the curriculum. Based on input received during stakeholder interviews, it appears that students, in particular, clearly understand why they are required to take specific General Studies courses and which courses fulfill skills, knowledge, or dispositional goals and outcomes. Additionally, LOPER 11 is a creative option which provides further opportunities for certain students to complete a wellness course and/or an additional course in any relevant General Studies category.

The creation of a distinct FYE course, as well as dispositional requirements in civic competency and human diversity, are noted positive changes as compared to the previous General Studies curriculum at UNK. While these requirements serve distinct purposes within the General Studies curriculum; both are also recognized as high impact practices by the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U). There is significant evidence nationwide that these teaching and learning practices have pronounced educational benefits for students, especially for those groups who have traditionally been underserved by higher education. The deliberate incorporation of these changes to the General Studies curriculum will likely serve students effectively while also reinforcing broader institutional culture, norms, and expectations.

The combination of courses across skills, knowledge, and dispositional requirements represents a reasonable balance of liberal arts and skills development. Given the Council's reform charge to develop a 30-hour General Studies program, the new model provides a balanced exposure to traditional liberal arts disciplines, while also providing space for specific student experiences that have been proven to have positive outcomes for students (e.g., FYE course, diversity requirement, etc.). Though the stakeholders with whom the review team met were largely supportive of the new curriculum and felt it represented this balance reasonably well given institutional constraints, there were some faculty who expressed deep concern about the reduction of requirements in traditional liberal arts disciplines and the perceived negative impacts of students not receiving a well-rounded education. These faculty voiced concern that the change to a 30-hour General Studies program has resulted in courses that are less rigorous, and that the revised curriculum represents an unhealthy and dangerous departure from the core vision and opportunity found in the liberal arts.

Assessment:

Since the last APR, the General Studies Council revised the learning objectives, and has created new assessment rubrics for each LOPER category. This is a very strong component of the existing General Studies program. The outcomes associated with the LOPER categories are clear and measurable, and most certainly address previous feedback from accrediting bodies concerned about the assessability of previous program goals and outcomes.

Most impressive, there appears to be an emergent culture of assessment developing across campus regarding General Studies. Faculty stakeholders interviewed during the review team visit were generally aware of assessment requirements and the common rubrics. This approach to continuous improvement is noteworthy and commendable. Additionally, the widespread use of common rubrics is a well-recognized best practice that is difficult to achieve on a consistent basis. The General Studies Council appears to work well with campus partners at the faculty and administrative level to provide oversight, guidance, and direction for assessment priorities, resources, and faculty support. Working with specific partners, like the Director of Assessment, have helped the General Studies Council build a solid foundation upon which to assess student learning, make changes as necessary, and involve faculty in the process.

Student, Faculty, Staff Experience:

The review team notes several relevant strengths of the revised curriculum that impact positively upon stakeholder experience. First, the revised structure increases opportunities for transfer students to meaningfully receive credit for previous coursework. This manifests in multiple ways. Students who complete an associate degree will enter UNK having satisfied their General Studies requirements, and there are now more opportunities for meaningful credit transfer given the addition of 15 credit hours of elective options within the broader structure of General Studies. Second, the courses that are currently part of the Nebraska Transfer Initiative will continue to satisfy requirements in the revised General Studies curriculum. Third, stakeholders expressed appreciation for the flexibility that the new curriculum provides creating more opportunities for students to pursue minors, certificates, or simply to explore a broader range of courses that are of interest. Last, several stakeholders made the interesting observation that the added flexibility built into the structure of General Studies may help to offset the loss of required General Studies coursework and contribute to a well-rounded education, although in different ways, than might be expected from a more robust grounding in the liberal arts and sciences.

First-year Experience:

The creation of a FYE course might be one of the biggest changes that resulted from UNK's recent General Studies revision process. This is a team-taught course designed to provide students an interdisciplinary perspective on a contemporary issue or problem. This course must also integrate information literacy skills and include a focus on the personal and professional development of first year students. Faculty select the specific problem/issue to focus on during the course and work collaboratively with campus stakeholders (e.g., Library, Student Affairs, etc.) to help address other relevant course outcomes. As this course remains in the early stages of implementation, changes continue to be made in response to stakeholder feedback.

Despite the inherent logistical challenges of creating a team-taught first year seminar course, there are several notable strengths of this newly created requirement at UNK. First, these types of courses embedded in a General Studies program are identified as an AAC&U high impact practice. According to the AAC&U, the best of these courses places an emphasis on critical inquiry, frequent writing, information literacy, and other skills that develop students' intellectual and practical competencies. Problems with implementation notwithstanding, stakeholders at UNK interviewed by the APR team expressed nearly universal support for the idea of an integrative course and/or a skills-based first year seminar experience. Second, the General Studies Council has demonstrated remarkable skill, agility, and responsiveness in rapidly addressing student and faculty concerns about this course. This ability to continually improve the course focus, design, and implementation is commendable and bodes well for the future success of this important course.

General Studies Governance and Campus Communication

The General Studies Council exercises strong leadership of the overall General Studies program. The Council has been highly engaged throughout the reform process and has successfully built consensus with a broad range of campus stakeholders. The council has reasonably clear processes and procedures for approving courses and assessing outcomes. Despite the many challenges of reforming General Studies and reducing the credit hour requirement to 30-31 hours in a short period of time, the Council has built a foundation upon which to continually improve and modify the program to best serve students. Of important note, the Council indicated during the Review Team's visit that they intend to add student representation in the near future to more effectively capture this important group's perspectives and concerns.

Recommendations

Coherence and Value:

Though stakeholders appreciate the clarity and purpose of each of the LOPER requirements, there does not appear to be campus consensus about the broader purpose of General Studies and/or how the different LOPER categories constitute something more than just the sum of the individual programmatic requirements and courses. The self-study identified this as a potential challenge based on data collected in a 2021 UNK student survey where 88.3% of respondents indicated that the General Studies program is “expressed primarily as a list of courses that students must take.” A student interviewed by the Review Team echoed these findings when she suggested there wasn’t a clear connection between the different courses and requirements. This is not a unique challenge to UNK, and the following suggestions and recommendations are offered in a spirit of continuous improvement.

Recommendation 1: Create opportunities to incentivize and systematically connect groups of faculty who teach courses within, and between, the different LOPER categories. This could be achieved by establishing communities of practice, a general education faculty scholars program, or even less formal mechanisms to regularly connect groups of faculty teaching General Studies courses. This could lead to sharing of best practices, collaboration, and innovative solutions to address the perceived lack of unity across the General Studies curriculum.

Recommendation 2: Consider opportunities to develop thematic interdisciplinary pathways through the existing General Studies program that are relevant to the challenges of the contemporary world. These pathways need not be mandatory for students, but simply identified as course options that help increase the integration and relevance of diverse offerings from across the university. The specific themes identified, of course, will likely depend on the specific strengths, culture, and existing course offerings of your campus. Examples might include themes that explore the science, social impacts, and ethics of emerging technology in the 21st century, or perhaps the impact of population change and urbanization in the United States. Courses could be identified across each of the LOPER categories that are most closely aligned with the selected themes, thus providing a measure of integration that helps to illustrate for students how the different LOPER requirements explore contemporary issues in different ways.

Assessment:

The Review Team recognizes assessment processes and practices as a clear strength of UNK’s General Studies program, and recommends the Council continue their impressive momentum in this area of the curriculum. The sustainability of any campuswide assessment effort depends, in part, upon the “buy-in” of the faculty, their ability to see the relevance of these efforts, and the integration of assessment into regular classroom practices and

procedures. The Review Team observed that the current process is somewhat labor intensive with faculty filling out and submitting Excel® rubrics which are then manually aggregated by the Director of General Studies. Furthermore, most of the assessment to date has been conducted at the course level with little campus conversation of the results or implications across the LOPER requirements.

Recommendation 1: Consider automating the collection of assessment data using existing campus tools to alleviate faculty workload. The Canvas Learning Management System, already widely used by faculty at UNK, has existing functionality that can potentially be used to assist in the collection and analysis of General Studies assessment data. Common rubrics are uploaded at the institutional account level and then imported into specific courses fulfilling General Studies requirements. Data is automatically aggregated across the relevant outcomes for further reflection and analysis by appropriate stakeholders. The University of Nebraska at Lincoln and the University of Nebraska Omaha are both using Canvas to varying extents to facilitate General Education assessment. The campus feedback at UNO has been very positive and the majority of faculty seem to appreciate the simplicity of this approach.

Recommendation 2: Clarify processes and procedures for “closing the loop” about campus-wide assessment of General Studies outcomes. Results should be shared broadly across campus, but as importantly, the process should provide opportunities for faculty, staff, and students to discuss the results and reflect on what follow-up actions should be taken in response to the data. This may be another opportunity to leverage faculty groups, beyond the General Studies Council, to engage in broad conversations about the purpose of the General Studies program and the success of the curriculum in meeting its broad goals. These campus conversations can obviously take many forms, but this again points to the importance of creating more formal process and forums to engage regularly with faculty beyond the Council (e.g., Communities-of-Practice).

First-year Experience Course:

UNK’s FYE course is a recent addition to the General Studies curriculum designed to provide a learning experience distinct from the ensuing years at UNK. Despite the broad support for the idea of an integrative and/or skills based first year seminar experience, the Review Team notes there is still some confusion and dissatisfaction about the intended purpose, goals, and timing of the course. Specifically, there was a sentiment expressed during interviews that the course currently tries to do too much and at the wrong time. Stakeholders are not sure if the course is supposed to be an “intro to college” skills-based course that helps students navigate campus and connect with relevant resources, or if the course is supposed to be a rigorous intellectual and interdisciplinary exploration of contemporary issues. It appears the laudable goal of the course is to do both, but the reality experienced by stakeholders is more confusion than connection and enlightenment. Students expressed the opinion that the

content and approach of some of the interdisciplinary topics exceeded their academic abilities at such an early point of their college journeys.

Recommendation 1: The General Studies Council should consider whether the FYE course should either be a skills-based course to connect students to campus resources that help them successfully transition to college, or if it should be an interdisciplinary exploration of big issues. The Review Team does not think the course can do both effectively and in ways that make sense to students. The Review Team urges the General Studies Council to focus the FYE course on integrating students to college, connecting them with relevant resources, and helping them develop a sense of belonging and purpose.

Recommendation 2: Consider moving the requirement for an interdisciplinary course experience to a later point in the General Studies curriculum. This might be an opportunity to rethink LOPER 11 and incorporate some of these important goals/outcomes into a FYE course. The LOPER 11 outcomes seem to be essential elements to successfully transitioning students to college, but these are currently not part of the First-Year Experience FYE course, nor are students required to take a LOPER 11 course. Moving some or all of these outcomes to a 1-3 hour FYE requirement would open space later in students' academic programs for a rigorous interdisciplinary course at a time when students are more prepared for the academic expectations of this type of experience.

General Studies Governance and Campus Communication

The General Studies Council exercises strong leadership of the overall General Studies program, but interviews conducted by the Review Team indicate there remains confusion about the Council's authority, faculty representation, and the process by which the Council does its work. Furthermore, it seems that despite the best efforts of the Council, their activities, initiatives, and priorities are not always well communicated across campus. These observations present opportunities for future action and consideration.

Recommendation 1: Recommend reviewing, clarifying, and communicating the governance structure to stakeholders across campus to address concerns expressed to the Review Team regarding the potential imbalance of the current representative structure. Stakeholders interviewed did not always understand how faculty/staff are selected to serve on the General Studies Council, whom the council ultimately represents (faculty or Academic Affairs), and to whom the Council reports. Although the Council's governing document clearly identifies the process of selecting voting members to the committee and other relevant governance issues, these processes, and their rationale, do not appear to be well-understood across campus. Additionally, some individuals interviewed by the Review Team questioned whether the Council represents the interests of the faculty or the Senior Vice Chancellor of Academic Affairs. Some questioned whether the Council should be embedded within the Faculty Senate rather than a stand-alone body of Academic Affairs to be more responsive to faculty concerns. For example,

some wondered if fears related to credit hour production created conflicts of interest, and some wondered whether current representative structure creates a dynamic that enforces divisive approaches. These concerns point to the importance of clarifying not only the governance structure, but the rationale for the existing structure, to faculty and staff stakeholders across campus.

Recommendation 2: Recommend ensuring timely and regular updates to campus stakeholders of decisions, actions, and discussions taken by the General Studies Council. Some individuals interviewed noted that decisions and actions of the Council are not always communicated in a timely manner. As an example, the most recent Council agenda available on [the website](#) is from April 2021, and the most recent meeting minutes appear to be from February 2021. In addition to regular updates to the website, it is recommended to reemphasize the vital role that each Council member has for proactively pushing information to their college colleagues about decisions and actions related to General Studies.

Recommendation 3: Recommend the creation of a strategic communication plan for General Studies developed with the support and assistance of University Communication and Marketing experts. A theme raised repeatedly during the APR was the issue of unclear, inconsistent, or untimely communication to stakeholders about General Studies. This despite the valiant efforts of everyone on the Council and their constant efforts to engage with faculty, staff, and students throughout campus. The problem does not appear to be one of effort, but more of a lack of synchronizing clear and focused messages to the right people, at the right time, and in the right medium. General Studies is at the core of the University's academic mission, and the recent revisions present a wonderful opportunity to communicate *why* the program's purpose, power, and potential is so valuable to campus stakeholders, prospective students, and the broader community. A program with significant campus-wide impact like General Studies deserves professional communication and marketing support to help with goal setting, message strategy, and audience analysis. This in turn can help improve the educational experience of all UNK students, drive improvements in recruitment and retention, and more effectively engage faculty and staff across campus.

Concluding Remarks

The Review Team wishes to acknowledge and provide special thanks to Dr. Greg Brown for his tireless efforts to support the team's review, and for arranging opportunities to meet with a comprehensive range of stakeholders from across campus. In addition, the Team thanks all the students, staff, and faculty who took time from their busy schedules to talk with us about their experiences with the General Studies curriculum.