

**Preparing for Higher Learning Commission Accreditation:  
General Education Review and Revision at the University of Northern Iowa  
Approved at Faculty Senate, November 13, 2017**

**Context**

In the fall of 2016, the University of Northern Iowa adopted a communally-developed Academic Master Plan that includes several initiatives related to engaged learning, student learning outcomes, general education, success pathways, and assessment. The Academic Master Plan, which is aligned with the University Strategic Plan, will allow us to focus our efforts on student engagement and success (the Unifying Goal of the Strategic Plan), elevating student learning and in turn meeting the requirements of the Higher Learning Commission. In this way, all of our efforts will be aligned toward optimizing our newly established University Mission, the Unifying Goal of Student Success, and the Strategic Initiative to “Strengthen the liberal arts core to provide a foundation for all majors.”

**Academic Master Plan**

**Core Principle 1: Foster an Engaged and Integrative Learning Environment.**

**Initiatives**

1. Cultivate and support intentional and developmental engaged learning experiences.
2. Create university wide learning outcomes that integrate the entire university experience and will guide a student’s journey.
3. Develop a Liberal Arts Core that provides a strong foundation for an engaged and integrative education.
4. Invest in an integrative curriculum that includes diverse pathways for student success.
5. Practice meaningful and sustainable assessment that informs changes to curriculum and pedagogy for improved student learning.

During the 2016-2017 academic year, student learning goals and general education revision were discussed at several Faculty Senate meetings, with broad support for the goals of the Academic Master Plan. Much of the work before us is in response to requirements of the Higher Learning Commission (HLC) and must be complete before our next accreditation visit in the 2020-2021 academic year.

Several specific HLC criteria relate to developing a clear mission for General Education that fits with the mission of the university and clearly articulated learning outcomes that are regularly assessed for purposes of continuous improvement. HLC expects institutions to be intentional and reflective in their development of their General Education Programs, which means revisiting them from time to time for the purposes of improving student learning. The University of Northern Iowa did not fare well with this aspect of our accreditation during the last visit; much will be expected in terms of our progress during the next visit.

**Higher Learning Commission Criteria for Accreditation**

3.B. The institution demonstrates that the exercise of intellectual inquiry and the acquisition, application, and integration of broad learning and skills are integral to its educational programs.

1. The general education program is appropriate to the mission, educational offerings, and degree levels of the institution.
2. The institution articulates the purposes, content, and intended learning outcomes of its undergraduate general education requirements. The program of general education is grounded in a philosophy or framework developed by the institution or adopted from an established framework. It imparts broad knowledge and intellectual concepts to students and develops skills and attitudes that the institution believes every college-educated person should possess.

3. Every degree program offered by the institution engages students in collecting, analyzing, and communicating information; in mastering modes of inquiry or creative work; and in developing skills adaptable to changing environments.
  4. The education offered by the institution recognizes the human and cultural diversity of the world in which students live and work.
- 4.B. The institution demonstrates a commitment to educational achievement and improvement through ongoing assessment of student learning.
1. The institution has clearly stated goals for student learning and effective processes for assessment of student learning and achievement of learning goals.
  2. The institution assesses achievement of the learning outcomes that it claims for its curricular and co-curricular programs.
  3. The institution uses the information gained from assessment to improve student learning.
  4. The institution's processes and methodologies to assess student learning reflect good practice, including the substantial participation of faculty and other instructional staff members.

To begin to satisfy the requirements of the Higher Learning Commission, a committee was established to collaboratively develop university-wide student learning goals (SLGs). Those goals were adopted by each of the College Senates and ultimately by the Faculty Senate. The goals are broad enough that every academic program will be able to articulate learning outcomes in each of the three areas, complete meaningful and sustainable assessment of these outcomes, and implement a process for continuous improvement of student learning—all requirements of the HLC.

### **University Level Student Learning Goals**

1. Critical Thinking: Graduates will demonstrate critical thinking through the ability to evaluate, analyze, and integrate information from a variety of sources in order to develop reasoned positions and solutions to problems.
2. Communication: Graduates will display competence in oral, written, and visual communication, as appropriate for their discipline.
3. Program Content Knowledge and Skills: Graduates will demonstrate discipline-specific knowledge and skills in their major fields of study.

Through the University Strategic Plan, the Academic Master Plan and the development of University Level Student Learning Goals, a foundation has been laid for several important initiatives that will be central to our next Higher Learning Commission Accreditation, including:

- Outlining engaged learning experiences for all academic programs
- Aligning program level outcomes with the University Level SLGs
- Developing meaningful and sustainable assessment of outcomes for the purposes of continuous improvement
- Developing Success Pathways for students
- Reviewing and Revising the General Education Program

Much of this work will be under the purview of academic programs, but we will need to engage the wider community in the final item, the review and revision of the General Education program.

### **General Education Program Review and Revision**

Based on conversations in the Faculty Senate and with the Liberal Arts Core Committee, a General Education Task Force will be convened to lead a collaborative and inclusive process to discuss General Education revision. The process will be in two stages. Stage one will focus on the development of a Mission for the UNI General Education Program and of clearly delineated Student Learning Outcomes

(SLOs). It will also include a consideration of the name of UNI's GEP. The SLOs will be a fundamental statement of our values: what is the foundation for learning at UNI? What knowledge, skills, and dispositions do we feel that all UNI students must have as part of their journey with us?

The end goal of this process will allow us to respond to essential criteria of HLC:

1. The general education program is appropriate to the mission, educational offerings, and degree levels of the institution.
2. The institution articulates the purposes, content, and intended learning outcomes of its undergraduate general education requirements. The program of general education is grounded in a philosophy or framework developed by the institution or adopted from an established framework. It imparts broad knowledge and intellectual concepts to students and develops skills and attitudes that the institution believes every college-educated person should possess.

Stage two will focus on developing a framework for UNI's General Education Program that will allow us to demonstrate that students are learning what we say they should learn: the knowledge, skills, and dispositions essential for a UNI graduate.

Stage One of the Task Force's work will include the following tasks as part of its charge:

- Conduct research on various missions, SLOs, and names of General Education Programs
- Review best practices in assessment of student learning
- Collaboratively and inclusively draft a mission statement and potential names for UNI's General Education Program that will be communally-owned; the mission must align with UNI's mission
- Collaboratively and inclusively draft Student Learning Outcomes that will be communally-owned; these learning outcomes must be aligned with the University SLGs
- Adopt the SLOs at each College Senate and the Faculty Senate with consultation from the Liberal Arts Core Committee.

Several suggestions were made by the Liberal Arts Core Committee about this process:

- Include advisers in the process
- Include students, and consider how the diversity requirement that was passed by NISG might fit into the outcomes
- Consider how the General Education Program provides a foundation for the majors and find ways to articulate the relationship between the learning outcome development in the General Education Program and the majors
- Consider the development of success pathways and engaged learning experiences for the General Education Program
- Include an understanding of the way in which the General Education Program should help students transition towards intellectual independence, ultimately assisting in their self-efficacy and overall success
- Include conversations about First Year Only courses, which have proven to increase retention and success, as well as Supportive Seminars, Supplemental Instruction, Peer Mentoring, and workshops from the Academic Learning Center, the Library, and other areas.

The process engaged in during Stage One should build trust, open dialogue about different ideas, investigate values and best practices, and allow for creativity and innovation. The expected timeline for Stage One (mission development, name and SLO adoption) is academic year 2017-2018. Once Stage One is complete, we will turn our attention to Stage Two, creating a framework for our General Education Program that meets the parameters of the mission and SLOs. This will occur in academic year 2018-2019. Because changes to our curriculum generally take 1-2 years to take through the curriculum processes, a new General Education Program will not officially begin until Fall 2020 or Fall 2021.

## **Committee to Re-envision the General Education Program at UNI**

The Committee to Re-envision the GEP will be responsible for guiding the process of reimagining General Education at the University of Northern Iowa. The process for developing a new General Education Program will come in two phases and will be collaborative and inclusive. Phase I will include crafting a bold mission statement, developing student learning outcomes, and considering the naming of UNI's GEP; the first phase will end with endorsement from the college senates, the Liberal Arts Core Committee, the Undergraduate Curriculum Committee (UCC), and the Faculty Senate.

Phase II will include aligning current courses, and possibly new courses, within a structure that allows students to meet the learning goals; students must be able to complete the program within 36 credit hours and the program must be delivered using current resources and even work towards realizing efficiencies. The committee will also determine how the new GEP will be coordinated, including administrative and faculty oversight. The structure, courses, and oversight will be reviewed to make certain that student curricular needs will be met and then will be endorsed, again, by the college senates, the Liberal Arts Core Committee, and the UCC, before going to the Faculty Senate for final approval.

### **Committee Members**

Brenda Bass, Dean, CSBS – Co-Chair, non-voting

John Fritch, Dean, CHAS – Co-Chair, non-voting

CJ (Carlos) Aldape, NISG

Heather Asmus, Advising

Tristan Bernhard, NISG

Adam Butler, CSBS

Jonathan Chenoweth, CHAS

Angie Cox, Library

Mary Donegan-Ritter, COE

Deedee Heistad, Director, Undergraduate Studies

Chuck Holcombe, CSBS

Ana Kogl, CSBS

Adrienne Lamberti, CHAS

Ken McCormick, CBA

Ryan McGeogh, CHAS

Jeff Morgan, UCC

Steve O'Kane, CHAS

John Ophus, LAC Fellow

Susan Roberts-Dobie, COE

Jeremy Schraffenberger, CHAS

Doug Shaw, CHAS