

I recently received an email from a faculty member questioning whether HLC really criticized our Liberal Arts Core during our 2010-11 reaccreditation process. I'm providing this email as an overview of our history of difficulties with respect to general education in the re-accreditation process. I hope this helps Senators and faculty members as the Senate considers the GERC's proposal.

In our 2010 self-study, we did what institutions do--we put our best foot forward and tried to make the case that our LAC met HLC's expectations. However, in their Assurance Report (attached here for your convenience), the HLC peer reviewers made clear that we fell short. I reference several key passages below. If you read the entire report, I'd caution you to be aware that you won't find a single place where the HLC says "you have to change your general education requirements," (though they get about as close they ever will to such a claim in a passage I quote below). HLC peer reviewers are always very aware that these are public documents, and they write them in such a way as to avoid, to the extent possible, glaring language that might embarrass an institution. HLC's goal is not to punish, but to help institutions improve.

When I first started in this process and read the 2010 Assurance Report, I didn't see the urgency for general education review. Then I read another assurance report or two and read ours again, and then another couple of assurance reports and read ours for a third time. Having thus immersed myself in the language of HLC, I started to see ways in which its language about our LAC was quite direct. Frankly, startlingly direct.

First, HLC's reservations about our Liberal Arts Core actually go back 20 years. In our 2000-01 reaffirmation, we were reaccredited but required to submit a progress report on our general education program in 2004. At that time, our accreditor was concerned not only about assessment within our general education program, but about "integration" within the program. The 2010 report mentions that "these challenges were not adequately addressed" (p. 14 of the Advancement section).

Second, although concerns about our LAC in 2010 focused on assessment, they also went beyond that. The HLC urged a "broad and inclusive discussion about the role and meaning of the liberal arts" (p.12 of Advancement Section), and expressed the hope that our First Year Experience effort would lead to a more holistic approach to the LAC, away from the distribution model that lacked a clear philosophy underlying it (also p. 12, Advancement). What was not widely shared on campus in 2011 following our reaccreditation was that concerns about our LAC were significant and nearly derailed a full reaccreditation. Here's the key passage: " The University was recently accepted into the HLC Assessment Academy. **Were that not the case, the team would recommend a focused visit on the development of a coherent general education program, articulation of measurable student learning outcomes for that program, and the implementation of effective assessment strategies with evidence of their use for ongoing curricular improvement.** However, with UNI's commitment to complete the 4-year Assessment Academy program **focusing on precisely these areas** and its ongoing work on the Foundations of Excellence initiative, the University **will have ample, proactive opportunities to address these challenges**"(p. 37 of Assurance Section, emphasis added). Note that assessment is a major component of this, but once again, HLC is expressing concern that the LAC lacks integration or, as it says in this quote, "coherence."

Third, HLC's concerns cannot be met by simply adding new outcomes onto our existing LAC. Indeed, we've already tried that. After completing the Assessment Academy, we tried to graft learning outcomes onto the LAC. Yes, we made a few, minor, substantive changes to the

structure of the LAC, but the core basically remained the same while we tried to graft assessable learning outcomes onto the different, already-existing categories. Despite repeated efforts, it wasn't successful. To use the language in the paragraph above, it was highly unlikely that reviewers would come here and think that we had implemented "effective assessment strategies with evidence of their use for ongoing curricular improvement" or that we had taken advantage of our "ample, proactive opportunities to address these challenges."

Facing the prospect of an HLC visit and far too little progress on a problem that HLC had identified for twenty years, the Provost decided that it was time to start from the ground up, with a liberal arts gen ed program that was built around learning outcomes. The Senate agreed, and charged the GERC with accomplishing that task. The GERC is not composed of a bunch of yes-people. There are people on that committee who were deeply skeptical of key parts of its charge: skeptical of the larger project of assessment and how it's carried out today, skeptical of reducing the hours, perhaps even skeptical of some of the Provost's claims. Nonetheless our colleagues on that committee worked for two solid years to come up with a thoroughly vetted plan, based on learning outcomes, that is assessable.

Because it went through this backward-design process rooted in learning outcomes, because those outcomes give it a coherence that our current LAC lacks, and because there will be a plan to assess those outcomes, I am pretty confident that the proposed gen ed core will meet HLC expectations. Unfortunately, it will not be fully implemented by the time our site visit happens. It's possible, maybe even likely, that we'll be asked to do some follow-up reporting on its implementation. If we were not to adopt this new core and would go down the road you're suggesting, I think it's almost certain that we'd get a focused visit, or placed into an accreditation pathway that involves more oversight and less flexibility. Either of these results would give the administration tremendous leverage to push curricular changes through, would require even more reporting and increase work at the departmental level, and would generally increase scrutiny and micromanagement of faculty. In short, not passing some form of the GERC's proposal is not a real option.

Anyone who wants to talk further about HLC expectations re: general education should feel free to get in touch with me at scott.peters@uni.edu.

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