

ON TEACHING

Office of Instructional Development

Writing Across the

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Welcome Back!

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new location
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UND Selected as Recipient of National Award for General Education Reform

"I want to congratulate the University of North Dakota for being selected as a recipient of a 2008 Association for General and Liberal Studies Award for Improving General Education." That is the first sentence of a letter received this summer announcing that UND had been selected "unanimously" for the award, and that our general education program reform was viewed as "an excellent model for other institutions."

The Association for General and Liberal Studies (AGLS) offers the reward to "promote institutional commitment to continuous quality improvement processes, to recognize faculty and institutions that practice these quality behaviors, and to provide much needed examples of effective, innovative improvement processes."

The award recognizes the ways in which UND's review and reform process allowed creation of a new Essential Studies (ES) program which matches up well against national recommendations. According to the AGLS awards committee, UND's general education reform process, carried out primarily through the General Education Task Force, is unique in the degree to which inclusivity was valued and the success of task force members at generating that inclusivity.

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Recapping the Reform Process

UND's nomination for the award cited the unique opportunity for program reform that had been created by the confluence of three factors: (1) findings from the General Education Longitudinal Study (GELS) which shed light on various ways in which our current program of general education was not achieving the intended purposes; (2) experiences of faculty on the

General Education Requirements Committee (GERC), demonstrating that general education courses were often taught as if the sole purpose were introducing the discipline and major; and (3) an up-coming (at that time) focused visit from the Higher Learning Commission (HLC), which had

criticized our work on assessment of general education during a 2004 comprehensive accreditation visit. Under the leadership of then-Interim Provost Martha Potvin, a small faculty team attended a workshop on general education assessment and reform, continuing the discussion after their return via a series of planning conversations about the program at UND. At the same time, additional assessments of learning were conducted, substantiating concerns that had already been raised.

In the summer of 2005, new Provost Greg Weisenstein provided a charge to members of a newly-appointed task force, kicking off what would become two years of intensive work with often weekly meetings.

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Task force members prepared by reading a variety of materials about general education nationally. Members agreed that the eventual proposal for change, whether dramatic or minimal, needed to address four needs. First, general education needed greater intentionality and visibility. Second, student learning must be the focus (meaning that disciplinary allegiances would need to be suspended during proposal development). Third, the program must be assessable. And fourth, a review process must be built in so that future changes could occur without total overhaul.

The process used by the task force was important to its eventual success. Task force members divided the work among themselves, but they shared information freely. Some of the sharing was internal, but staying connected to faculty across campus was viewed as critical. Outreach to individual departments occurred as a natural result of that intention to keep others informed: if faculty might not “come to us” with their ideas, task force members could go directly to them for input and feedback.

The task force adopted a consensus model of decision-making, imposing on itself a 2/3 rule which specified that any proposal or idea needed to receive a 2/3 vote of members present in order to be included in the eventual proposal. By the end of the voting, every member of the task force, including those in leadership roles, had “won some and lost some” as items were selected for inclusion in the final proposal. But every idea with a champion on campus, whether that champion sat on the task force or not, was debated and considered at some point during the group’s work as a result of the commitment to openness and inclusiveness. By the end of the work, the more than 20 members of the task force were able to serve as advocates for the proposal because of satisfaction with the process, although no individual would have supported every last feature of the new plan.

Following approval at the May 2007 meeting of the University Senate, members of the task force steering committee, members of the GERC, and many additional faculty volunteers devoted countless hours to fleshing out the details: developing criteria for approval of new course requirements, creating rubrics which could be used to assess learning of the various goals, coming up with answers to questions for advisors, developing a job description for the new director position, etc. As of August 2008, entering first-year students have been enrolled in ES and members of the oversight committee (now named the Essential Studies Committee) are beginning the transition.

Indicators of Success

It will be some time before UND graduates will provide demonstration of the ES program’s successes and failures. However, there have already been several indicators of the success of UND’s reform effort. Most notably, few faculty are oblivious to general education today. UND’s general education has received more purposeful faculty attention in the last three years than perhaps at any previous era in its history. The goal of making general education “matter” across campus has been quite thoroughly met.

Another major change is appointment of a Director of Essential Studies. The job description spells out in some detail a great many responsibilities - but perhaps what’s most important is that the position’s very existence is evidence of the program’s centrality on campus. In previous years, general education managed itself with oversight from an overburdened faculty committee. In future years, an ES director will provide opportunities for new faculty to learn about the program, for faculty teaching ES courses around a particular goal to share ideas for improving the program, and for faculty across campus to stay more informed.

There have been other achievements as well:

- New goal language is intended to be more student-friendly.
- Goals were written to be assessable so that informed decisions can be made for continuous program improvement.
- Specific needs (e.g., recognized gaps in student learning around the old “cultural familiarity” goal) were addressed.
- Goals were updated to include increasingly important skills like quantitative reasoning and information literacy.

It will be at least four years before more concrete indicators of student learning are available. In the meantime, faculty at UND can be proud to receive national recognition for work to improve such a critical program - with special congratulations due to members of the task force and the GERC.



The HLC Focused Visit: What Did We Hear about General Education

Joan Hawthorne, Assistant Provost for Assessment

In a written report issued in the wake of UND's recent accreditation visit from the HLC (Higher Learning Commission), visiting team members commended the university for its progress on assessment. Assessment within the general education program was specifically noted, along with use of assessment findings to guide development of a new Essential Studies (ES) program. Comments were made about the "visionary" new ES program and the "praiseworthy" longitudinal study of general education which preceded (and provided incentive for) the work on general education revision. This is particularly notable given that in the most recent full visit, in 2004, general education was singled out as an area in need of considerably more serious assessment efforts. By the time of the April 2008 focused visit on assessment, team members described UND's general education reform work as a "stellar example of how to use assessment...to improve student learning."

How did we get to this much-improved point?

2000-2008: What Happened?

The General Education Longitudinal Study (GELS), which lasted from 2000-2006 (and may feel like "old news" on campus, given all the work that has occurred subsequently), provided faculty with a genuine understanding of how students were experiencing general education at UND. Faculty who participated in the project learned that the gen ed program was usually invisible to students. Teachers of gen ed courses often gave students no indication that the courses were part of a general education program, or that there were gen ed program goals being addressed in those courses. Students experienced the courses as (mostly) mass lecture courses that existed to provide an introduction to the content of the disciplines.

When asked about their achievement of the cross-disciplinary gen ed goals (for example creative thinking or familiarity with world cultures), senior students interviewed in the GELS project could identify places where they had gained the specified skills and knowledge - but those places were very rarely in gen ed courses. Students often misunderstood the meaning of the goals, and nothing that happened in most gen ed courses served to correct those misapprehensions.

The gen ed program, in sum, was not serving the purposes for which it was designed. The GELS study was an indirect form of assessment - information from it

was in the form of student impressions rather than actual student performance of the goals in question - but it was powerful.

Additional information about the general education program, including data from both direct and indirect assessment, was gathered through other means. Papers of senior level students were collected and UND faculty participated in scoring sessions to ascertain the degree to which desired competencies in critical thinking and written communication were demonstrated in actual student work. An analysis of transcripts of graduating seniors showed that students achieved much more exposure to some gen ed goals than to others (many students were especially weak on exposure to the "familiarity with cultures" goal). An assessment research project conducted by a team of interested faculty lent support to the notion that disconcerting numbers of students were not achieving competency on the cultures goal and could not demonstrate the skills they were expected to have gained. (Additional information on these projects is available at <<http://www.und.nodak.edu/dept/datacol/assessment/GenEd/index.htm>>.)

All of this information was reviewed by members of the General Education Task Force as they worked to review the old gen ed program and consider what changes, if any, should be included in their new proposal. According to our accreditation team visitors, task force members did an especially outstanding effort of "compromis[ing] with state requirements while standing firm on its intellectual values" when they put together the ES program that is now being implemented.

2008-2013: What's Next?

Of course, any accreditation site visit is a snapshot of a moment in time, and a key part of the purpose is to provide consultation that can be used to help an institution strengthen and sustain positive change. In the final report, UND's visiting team members emphasized the importance of the new director position within Essential Studies, and they encouraged continuation of the position under the "directorship of a tenured faculty member" - which is exactly what has been achieved with the recent appointment of Dr. Tom Steen as ES Director. They pointed out a discrepancy between institutional goals as defined in the mission statement and the new ES goals, and recommended that revisions to the mission be considered to align wording where appropriate.

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Continued attention to assessment, in ES and in the major, will be important during the next HLC visit (occurring in 2013-14, which is not that far into the future). Team members visiting at that time will take a hard look at the diligence with which UND has sustained its assessment efforts. They'll want to know what we're learning about the effectiveness of ES: is it addressing the problems which led to its creation? They'll seek evidence that our progress in assessment of general education wasn't window dressing for a focused visit, but true evidence of a shift in culture that is permeating the program and the institution. That's the challenge to ES - and to UND as a whole.



The New Office of Essential Studies

Tom Steen, Director

This year, as part of the campus' work in implementing the Essential Studies program, UND is establishing an administrative office to provide leadership for general education.

As you may know, this is a first—our general education program has not had an administrative “home” since the University College was phased out in the early 90's. And unlike the U-College, the sole responsibility of the Essential Studies Office will be to support and develop the academic program in general education.

As you may also know, especially if you've been part of the campus work to revise UND's general education curriculum, an office and director were among the major recommendations from the General Education Task Force in its final report in Spring, 2007. The Task Force felt that the general education program's large size and critical importance were such that the University needed to provide dedicated support for both students and faculty as they engage in their “Essential Studies” work. Indeed, the Task Force noted that the general education program was the single largest academic program on campus—in terms of number of courses and credits taken—and yet was not supported by an administrative office and a person responsible for administrative leadership. The Task Force argued that this lack was one reason why general education at UND had, over time, come to be viewed more as a group of required courses to “get through and out of the way” than a vital, valuable, and challenging part of the campus' offerings in undergraduate education.

So the new office has been set up to meet that need.

So the new office has been set up to meet that need. It will serve as the administrative home for the Essential Studies Program. The Office will work hand-in-hand with Senate's Essential Studies Committee (formerly the General Education Requirements Committee). The Committee continues its role as the policy-making unit for the program and as the unit responsible for approving program requirements. This includes the validation and revalidation of all Essential Studies courses, as well as review and approval of individual student petitions for program exceptions. The Essential Studies Office's function is administrative: looking after instructional and financial resources, gathering information and collecting data for the Committee's deliberations and for program assessment, and generally making sure that students and faculty know what the program is about. The Office will also host campus events designed to support the Essential Studies program and improve its visibility and make it easier for students, advisors, and instructors to find ES information.

With the addition of an administrative office to go along with the Senate's committee, we are, in a sense, doubling the campus resources in support of general education. Working together, the Committee and the Office will provide a “new and improved” program in and for general education. Ultimately, the goal is to develop Essential Studies into a UND signature program—and one that is academically sound, taught with vigor and a clear intention toward its educational goals, and studied thoughtfully and deeply.



University Writing Program Introduces

Shane Winterhalter,
Interim Coordinator

Anne Kelsch, Director of the Office of Instructional Development and the University Writing Program, would like to announce that Shane Winterhalter recently accepted the position of Interim Coordinator for the Writing Center for 2008-2009. He recently finished his Master's Degree in English at UND, and taught College Composition courses for three years, as well as working in the Writing Center. His academic interests include literary fiction, philosophy and religion, and composition theory. Shane is originally from Toledo, Ohio and has also lived in Northeast Georgia and Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. In his free time, he enjoys pretending to learn to cook.

Upcoming Collaboration Conferences

The Collaboration for the Advancement of College Teaching and Learning presents two major conferences each year which bring together 300-400 faculty, student affairs personnel, administrators, and staff to discuss teaching and learning. These events held in November and February in Bloomington, Minnesota, feature keynote speakers of national and international renown as well as presenters from Collaboration institutions.

- The theme of the fall conference is “CULTURE MATTERS: Designing Learning Environments to Foster Cultural Awareness and Intercultural Competence.” The conference takes place November 21--22, 2008 at the Sheraton Hotel in Bloomington, Minnesota. Noted keynote speaker Carlos Cortés, more than thirty-five concurrent sessions, and five preconference workshops all focus on two of the most critical issues in higher education today—cultural awareness and intercultural competence.
- The winter conference, held February 13--14, 2009, is entitled “THE LEARNING EDUCATOR: Fostering Our Own Development for Better Practice and Results.” The Collaboration is inviting proposals for sessions that explore and model effective practice; promote stimulating dialogue, inquiry, and problem-solving; or engage participants in exploring opportunities for collaboration on topics related to classroom research, reflective practice, and professional learning. The proposal deadline is September 19, 2008.

For more information on these conferences, please visit the conference web site at www.collab.org. If you would like to seek funding to attend a Collaboration Conference, follow the newly revised FIDC guidelines available on the OID web site.

Faculty Lunch Discussion Series

The first in our Teaching with Technology Series:

“Assessing the Opportunities and Challenges of Using Classroom Technologies: What is lost and what is gained”

Wednesday, October 1
12:00-1:00 PM, River Valley Room

Presenter: Dr. Dave Yearwood, Professor
Technology Department

Due to University Policy box lunches will no longer be provided, you are welcome to bring your own lunch.

Faculty Study Seminars

Two Faculty Study Seminars (FSS) will be offered during Fall 2008. The FSS program provides a means for faculty with common interests to learn more about a teaching-related topic. Each FSS group meets four times during a single semester, at times mutually agreed to by participants, to read and discuss a teaching-related book (books provided by the Office of Instructional Development). The only obligation of participants is to read and come ready to discuss.

Fall FSS books are:

Creating Significant Learning Experiences: An Integrated Approach to Designing College Courses by Dee Fink (Jossey-Bass, 2003).

Dee Fink's philosophical and practical approach to course design is based on the premise that teaching should produce something others can observe and conclude "That learning experience resulted in something that is truly significant in terms of the students' lives" (p. 4). This book offers faculty a way to look at their courses, structure them in terms of the knowledge and skills they see as most significant, and create learning experiences that help students achieve those course objectives. If you are designing a new course, redesigning an old one or taking a broader look at significant learning across your curriculum this book can help provide the tools to think about and create useful change.

They Say / I Say: The Moves That Matter in Academic Writing by Gerald Graff and Cathy Birkenstein (Norton, 2006).

Praised for "demystifying the tricks of the writer's trade," *They Say/I Say* is used by many teachers (including a number in UND's freshman composition program) who want to help students learn to write and think at a college level. The book synopsis says it all: "At a time when so many lament the decline of writing skills among Americans, *They Say/I Say* teaches the core moves of effective argumentative writing. Suggesting that there are certain moves that experienced writers use instinctively, and that the moves can be learned." So if you have been frustrated with your students writing and thinking skills, this book offers both food for thought and a pragmatic approach to talking with your students effectively about their writing.

If you have any questions or are interested in participating in either FSS please send an email to anne_kelsch@und.nodak.edu

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Essential Studies Fall Summit
September 5, 2008

Keynote Speaker: Stephen Brookfield

UND begins its innovative new general education program in the fall of 2008 and this event includes a number of sessions to help faculty and advisors learn more about Essential Studies.

The whole campus is invited to the Keynote Speech at 1:00 in the Lecture Bowl at the Memorial Union. President Kelly will be there to introduce the new Director of Essential Studies Thomas Steen to the campus and Dr. Stephen Brookfield, an internationally recognized expert in post-secondary education, will herald in the new program with his talk.

Since beginning his teaching career in 1970, Stephen Brookfield has worked in England, Canada, Australia, and the United States, teaching in a variety of college settings. He has written ten books on adult learning, teaching, critical thinking, discussion methods and critical theory, four of which have won the Cyril O. Houle World Award for Literature in Adult Education (in 1986, 1989, 1996 and 2005). He also won the 1986 Imogene Okes Award for Outstanding Research in Adult Education.

For more information about Professor Brookfield see <http://www.stephenbrookfield.com>

Other Summit sessions, all held at the Memorial Union, include a Revalidation Workshop at 9:30; an Advising Workshop at 11:00; and an ES Model Projects Poster Session at 2:30. (See insert for complete schedule.)
To register: Call or e-mail Amanda at 7-4138 or <vpaastudent@mail.und.nodak.edu>

On Teaching is published six times a year as a service to UND faculty. **Editor:** Anne Kelsch
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