

Report of the Gen Ed Task Force Subcommittee on The Common Experience

August 14, 2006

Members: Donna Brown, Lisa Burger, Sally Pyle, Libby Rankin, Dan Rice

What do you consider to be the end purpose of education? Is it not to bring about an integrated individual? - Krishnamurti

In the book “Strong Foundations: Twelve Principles for Effective General Education Programs” (American Association of Colleges, 1994) educational coherence, fostering academic community and engaging in dialogs across academic specialties are considered essential components of effective general education. These concepts are all part of “The Common Experience” model, in which students from all subject areas and backgrounds are given at least one common cross-disciplinary experience. Students have widely differing interests and UND educates undergraduates in a variety of disciplines. This might be seen as a hindrance to the idea of a common experience, however, scholars in all disciplines must share ideas and interact in order to learn and succeed. Studying issues from a variety of perspectives helps reveal their complexities. A common experience can draw students into discussion and help them understand the interconnectedness of learning.

The common experience has been implemented at many different colleges and universities. The models used are wide ranging and may include:

- common reading programs for incoming freshmen
- limited sets of core courses, clustered or linked courses
- senior capstone courses
- specific learning communities

The benefits of these programs are to help build community among students, to provide a strong, common academic component and to help students learn to explore contemporary issues. These experiences can help stimulate a sense of inquiry and a love of learning among students and help students develop skills transferable from discipline to discipline and from classroom experience to life experience. When students feel they are part of a community their university experience is enhanced and their retention rates increase.

While all these programs can be successful it would not be possible, or desirable, to implement them all at UND. For an all inclusive common reading program to be meaningful it would need to be tied into courses or discussion sessions—and it is unlikely that enough courses could be modified to include this component. Some colleges arrange to have authors brought in for book discussions and require students to attend these lectures. It is difficult to envision how this would be accomplished within our current model of general education at UND.

At this time UND provides a wide range of core courses for students and though many students take similar general education courses they do not all get a common educational experience. In order to establish a more common set of core courses we would have to limit our current offerings, which would not be practical. Linking or clustering courses could enhance the common experience, but would require an extensive cooperative effort that would take time to complete and implement and so isn't realistic in the short term. In addition, for students to complete some disciplines within a four year period (engineering for example) they must begin

taking required subject courses immediately. Limiting our general education courses would be an impediment for students in these programs. There are departments that require students to take capstone courses, but to have a common senior capstone course would require extensive faculty participation and would add hours to some disciplines' graduation requirement.

While there are certainly problems associated with implementing a common experience there are programs in place at UND that are within the scope of this model. In studying the common experience this subcommittee has looked at a variety of different programs and used these, in conjunction with programs and experiences already in place at UND, to formulate the following **recommendations and suggestions**.

1. Create a position for a Director of General Education—or allocate responsibility for Gen Ed to someone in the Provost's office.

Rationale: General Education includes courses from virtually every college and department on campus. Constant oversight of this educational component is beyond the capacity of current faculty and administrators. A director dedicated to General Education would provide the most coherent assessment and management for this important aspect of the university experience and could address some of the problems associated with implementing linked or clustered courses or a common senior capstone course.

2. Invest more resources in the existing living and learning communities.

Rationale: UND has a number of learning communities in place, including Integrated Studies, Interdisciplinary Studies, Honors, Living and Learning @ JF (also called TLC at JFS), the American Indian and the Wellness Community. These programs offer aspects of the common experience to participating students. Increasing the resources available to administer these underfunded communities would allow them to expand the number of students involved in this type of common experience. In addition, institutional support in the form of publicity could make these communities, and their benefits, more visible to current and incoming students thereby increasing the number of participants. In addition, some of these communities are undersubscribed, not because students aren't interested, but because they are not aware of the communities or of the benefits associated with being a part of a living and learning community.

3. Continue to support the common reading offering within the Introduction to University Life course.

Rationale: While many colleges and universities are moving toward a common reading experience for incoming freshmen, there are considerable difficulties in getting students to take such a common reading seriously. However, UND does have a common reading component embedded within its Introduction to University Life course (UNIV 101). With the recent addition of extra sections of this course more students are now able to participate in a common reading experience. A continued commitment to this course, more faculty involvement, and the retention of the common reading experience would create another opportunity for a common experience for many students.