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# Rethinking the Role of Leadership in General Education Reform

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It is no secret in higher education that despite enormous collective energy, efforts, and resources, many institutions have been less than successful in reforming general education (GE) curricula (Gaff, 1980). Reform efforts are commonly fraught with challenges and poor success rates (Dennis, Halbert, & Phillips, 2010; Kotter, 1996; Zemsky, 2009). Gaston and Gaff, in their 2009 publication *Revising General Education—and Avoiding the Potholes*, note at least fifty different reasons why GE reform is so difficult. They also offer a wide range of practical advice for successfully revising general education. They suggest, for example, that those engaged in meaningful reform need to define the problem that needs to be fixed, engage in program planning, be mindful of task force procedures, and oversee program implementation. Almost all of their suggestions can be reduced to a single common denominator: Good leadership is critical to nearly all reform challenges (Burney & Perkins, 2010; Fear, Adamek, & Imig, 2002; Gano-Phillips & Barnett, 2008; Kotter, 1996). Gaff (1980) has warned that “task forces usually bring much talent and enthusiasm to the task of reforming general education, but few have experience in providing leadership for institutional change” (p. 50).

What, then, constitutes good leadership in the context of general education reform or revitalization? Recognizing that there is no single correct definition or style of leadership that will ensure a successful reform outcome (Gano-Phillips & Barnett, 2010; Kaufman, 1998; Kotter, 1996; Lucas, 2000b;

Yukl, 2002), this article highlights several key themes regarding leadership of GE reform using three campus examples to demonstrate similarities and variations in these themes across institutions. Gano-Phillips and Barnett (2010) have noted that “nowhere is self-examination more critical to general education reform than in the area of leadership. By acknowledging strengths and challenges in their leadership structures, institutions can begin to identify and establish a strong, visible leadership—at the faculty and administrative levels—necessary for achieving success in the reform efforts” (pp. 12–13). These three institutions (the University of North Dakota, the University of Michigan–Flint, and the University of Nebraska–Lincoln) were chosen as case studies because while their campus reform efforts emphasized very different approaches to GE reform (focusing on evidence, process, and governance, respectively), the institutions share three underlying themes regarding leadership of general education reform.

One leadership theme that emerges is that *collaboration in leadership* is essential to successful reform given the diverse and far-reaching aspects of general education curriculum across institutions (Gaff, 2007; Henry, 2006; Kotter, 1996; Lucas, 2000a). GE reform is not likely to be accomplished by a single individual, who attempts to steer a campus in a particular direction. Coleman (1997) has aptly noted, “While the sources of transforming change will undoubtedly vary at differing institutions, they are unlikely to reside in an individual” (p. 4). Rather, successful GE reform is likely to require a team of leaders, at various times and at various levels within the institution, to move forward (Mitchell et al., 2010). The formation of this type of leadership team is aided by opportunities to participate in intensive conversations that allow initial leadership teams to form, consolidate, and strengthen during a discrete gestation period (Lucas, 2000a). For the institutions represented in this article, that gestation period began with participation in a five-day Institute on General Education sponsored by the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U). The focused time to consider GE reform combined with national expertise, forward thinking promoted by the Liberal Education and America’s Promise Initiative (AAC&U, 2008), and discussions with institutions in similar positions assisted in defining leadership teams and identifying barriers as well as strategies with which to approach reform on their home campuses. As noted in the case studies that follow, the leadership outcomes from this retreat time were dissimilar, but participation in the institute did play a critical role in moving reform efforts forward (Guarasci, 2006).

A second leadership theme, *developing trust among constituents*, is intended to support the efforts of a collaborative approach to leadership in institution-wide reform (Gano-Phillips & Barnett, 2010; Roach, 2010; Yukl, 2002). In many institutions, preexisting conditions of secrecy and suspicion across disciplines

or academic units dominate the landscape and often prevent honest and meaningful conversations necessary to realize significant progress (March, 1999). The inherent disparate disciplinary interests of constituents and a lack of a common, unified purpose among them exacerbate this problem (Rice, 2006). We have entrenched ourselves, over long periods of time, deeply within our disciplines, colleges, or schools and have contributed to the specialization of higher education, a concept that runs counter to the reform work of institution-wide programs like general education. Developing the trust of constituents through a collaborative leadership approach affords us the opportunity to understand our differences and to search for common ground (Ferren & Mussell, 2000; Kelsch, Hawthorne, & Steen, 2010).

Leadership teams who put a high priority on building institutional trust also position themselves to address a third leadership concept, *acting as stewards of the institution* (Schneider, 1998). When leaders adopt a stewardship posture, rather than acting as proponents of their own programs, departments, or units, they transcend narrow views of the institution, and the needs of the whole campus relevant to the reform process become salient (Steele, 2006). Modeling behavior that considers the best interests of the entire institution further supports a leadership team's ability to build trust with constituents, thus increasing the chances for successful reform (Kipling & Ferren, 2000; Watt, 2005). By examining the role of leadership using brief case studies from three different universities, this article demonstrates the importance of these three aspects of leadership in GE reform. Collectively these concepts help create the framework by which reform might be approached, and they can heavily influence the success or failure of institutional change (Gano-Phillips & Barnett, 2010).

## University of North Dakota Leadership Experiences: An Evidence-Based Tradition

Collaborative ownership was at the core of the University of North Dakota (UND) general education reform work, beginning during data collection that preceded the official start of a reform effort and continuing through the work of an active and engaged task force. Administrators pushed power down, spreading it out among faculty and other stakeholders who would take charge of the process. Careful attention to building trust among team members and fostering a shared sense of program stewardship enabled eventual success.

Leadership toward curricular reform at UND began with one person, an associate provost, who recognized a need for better information in order to understand student learning within our general education program. Her first step was to form a group of faculty who, as a study team, would begin to see themselves

as responsible for stewarding UND's GE program forward. They undertook a six-year longitudinal assessment project, the General Education Longitudinal Study (GELS), which aimed at understanding student perceptions of their learning around GE. At the end of the day, the data resulting from the GELS eventually led to wholesale program reform.

Part of the leadership provided by that associate provost involved purposefully cultivating a sense of stewardship for GE among the faculty who served as members of the GELS team, inspiring them to vest in both the GE program itself and the well-being of the institution as a whole. Building on the assumption that student learning is a shared core value and an important measure of institutional success, team members were asked from the outset to set aside disciplinary and personal concerns that might narrow their focus in order to further learning as the primary value. That focus on students and their learning stayed at the heart of the GELS work throughout the entire study.

The ten members of the GELS team assumed collaborative responsibility for every phase of the project. The team met in lengthy biannual retreats to write interview scripts, which were then used by participants to conduct once-per-semester interviews with a cohort of one hundred first-year students. The team interviewed those students until graduation or departure from the university. Interviews were typed up and read by other team members in lengthy "reading sessions," followed by additional hours devoted to analysis of the most recent semester's data. The project was genuinely owned by the faculty participants, who both "did the work" and structured the process. An unforeseen advantage of our study approach was that it framed stewardship, which Gaff (2007) describes as "this special kind of faculty leadership that is desperately needed but seldom recognized," within the context of grant work and scholarly study. As Gaff notes, "The work faculty do in assuming responsibility for significant portions of the educational program and for leading educational innovations lacks a name that has academic currency." He further argues, "If the faculty are actually to provide stewardship for the instructional program, they need to conceptualize this kind of work, and they also need to honor and support their colleagues who labor to provide this form of academic leadership" (p. 12). In hindsight it is apparent that the GELS provided a more readily valued scholarly framework for efforts that often are not appropriately acknowledged or rewarded.

Team members had originally bought into the notion of institutional stewardship at the behest of the associate provost. But as interviews with students about their learning progressed and data regarding student learning were amassed, faculty members of the GELS team began to feel a strengthened sense of responsibility for the GE program. It became apparent to team members that students were not learning what we claimed they would within the courses

that made up the GE program. A growing perception of the degree to which GE was essentially unsuccessful in promoting the learning outcomes espoused for the program persuaded faculty participants that GE must change. The study's findings began inspiring a more powerful form of stewardship, one born of the interviewing experience itself: After hearing student stories that illustrated the profound ways in which GE (in its current state) was failing to promote intended learning, faculty were moved to a greater sense of urgency about the importance of using their work to leverage program change. Although they may not have recognized it, these faculty were becoming "cultural change agents" who were moving our campus "towards a culture that focuses on learning" and "a culture of evidence" (Leskes, 2006, p. 30).

Motivated by that urgency, members of the team became strongly committed to sharing the disappointing results with colleagues across campus. In formal presentations, informal conversations, and written documents, team members communicated their findings to faculty and administrators. Their efforts, made possible by the leadership and vision of a by-then retired associate provost, laid the foundational groundwork for GE reform, providing both needed data about student learning and a precedent of faculty ownership that would persist throughout the process.

A similar collaborative approach to fostering stewardship for the GE program, this time under the leadership of a different key individual, moved UND another step closer to reform. The dean of arts and sciences, then serving as the interim provost, supported efforts to send a group to the AAC&U institute in Newport, Rhode Island. Institute participants, chosen for their leadership positions around GE (chair of the GE committee, chair of the assessment committee, faculty coordinator for the GELS, the assistant provost for assessment, and the provost herself), returned from the institute with a newly fostered sense that it was not only possible but imperative to improve GE. Their retreat time served other key purposes as well. The participation of the interim provost as an active and objective member demonstrated administrative support for genuine reform and greatly strengthened faculty faith in the efficacy of the work. Furthermore, the cooperative working experience at the retreat encouraged the development of trust in each other as individuals willing to step forward as leaders and stewards in collaborative leadership of a "next phase" of the process. Equally important, group members began to develop next steps, agreeing that the collection of additional data was essential in order to make a persuasive case for reform to the campus as a whole. Retreat participants came to recognize that "the sustainability of change initiatives for an organization is related to the depth of self-examination and learning that takes place within its culture" (Awbrey, 2005, p. 13). Accordingly, collection of additional data became a top priority.

During the next year, various kinds of data were collected and reviewed, this time including direct assessments of student learning, while members of the Newport group grew into the core of a steering committee for a yet-to-be-created task force. Direct assessments, the results of which were presented to campus, allowed faculty to see the work of high-achieving students, but they also provided disheartening confirmation regarding the numbers of students graduating while still unable to demonstrate even basic levels of intended learning. The group initiated several other information-gathering projects to better understand how students experienced the GE program. One study examined the frequency with which each of the two hundred-plus GE courses was taken. Team members learned that a typical GE program of study drew from a core of about thirty high-frequency courses. A departmental survey allowed steering committee members, for the first time, to see the alignments between GE courses and GE goals. A follow-up transcript analysis revealed which goals were most and least frequently “hit” by students as they moved through the GE program.

Information about the local context was supplemented by information from institutions elsewhere, as steering committee members continued to build expertise regarding national trends by mining contacts and referrals gleaned through the Newport retreat (Beal & Trigger, 2010). Information collected both locally and nationally supported the conclusion that there was both room and opportunity for significant improvement in our GE program.

Crucial decisions throughout that year were left in the hands of the faculty-dominated steering committee. Members of the steering committee collected and discussed the new data and debated means of engaging more faculty with the new information. They proposed and refined items about GE oversight for inclusion in a new institutional strategic plan and strategized regarding how to make the strongest case for a formalized reform effort. Working together they planned steps that would enable continued movement toward reform, including deciding whom to invite onto a task force, what kind of power and autonomy the task force would have, and what the group’s charge would be.

That core set of leaders chose task force members deliberately, not only incorporating a wide range of campus representatives from various positions and disciplines and a balance of gender and experience but also selecting members with a strong track record of collegiality and campus citizenship. At this stage the importance of effective communication with the broader campus community was self-evident. Selecting task force members who were generally respected and widely recognized as judicious, fair thinkers would position the group well for the educative and persuasive efforts central to their mission.

An integral assumption of the task force, made explicit at the first meeting, was that members would drop disciplinary allegiances for the purposes

of the group's work: "Getting faculty to change the way they think about their work—moving from an individualistic approach ('my work') to a more collaborative approach ('our work')—is a critical transition that is deeply rooted in professional assumptions" (Rice, 2006, p. 12). As with the earlier GELS team, task force members were trusted to be deeply motivated by the goal of enhancing student learning. Findings from previous efforts at data collection were shared at the group's first meetings, and the shared sense of stewardship for GE developed during the orientation process persisted throughout the group's work.

Another assumption was that task force members would work collaboratively to be spokespeople for and advocates of GE across campus, but without insisting on personal agendas. Rather than making a commitment to a set outcome, task force members made a commitment to listening, seeking data, gathering input, and trusting an iterative communication process to guide the work in a productive direction (Hoff, 1999, p. 320). It would be through a process of continuous advocacy for better institutional stewardship of GE, trust in colleagues, and reliance on effective communication as a tool for engaging input, and, eventually, soliciting support, that reform would proceed.

In retrospect, there are clear similarities in the leadership of the associate provost who initiated the GELS and that of the interim provost who vested authority in the steering committee and then the GE task force. In both cases, power was forced down and across the academic hierarchy, ultimately resting in a large and expanding pool of diverse individuals. Those involved collaborated well, kept their work rooted in data, and recognized the importance of effective communicating.

### Good Leadership Took the Form of . . .

Leadership in the UND context was effective but low-key. Individuals who had the authority to control reform took a largely hands-off approach in significant ways. This reflects recognition on their part that a directive approach from administration would, at our institution, lead to faculty disengagement. They ultimately believed that faculty cared about student learning and when confronted with less than satisfying results, would be motivated to improve it. This assumption allowed them to engage faculty and other stakeholders openly and to entrust the program's future to the process, believing that faculty would propose productive, workable reforms. Both the associate provost and the interim provost worked as team members, treating faculty as colleagues and inspiring with their dedication but never insisting on a preferred set of strategies, policies, or procedures. Both, in fact, were skilled at providing opportunities for faculty leaders to emerge and then allowing those faculty leaders to assume



responsibility for first the data-collection effort and then the reform process itself. Use of data, engagement of constituents, and effective communication with all of campus were critical to GE reform at UND—but all of these were supported and enabled by effective leadership provided at critical moments in the reform process.

## Leadership of General Education Reform at the University of Michigan–Flint: The Process of Institutional Change

While the leadership of UND focused on the use of campus evidence to motivate GE reform, the University of Michigan–Flint (UM-Flint) instead focused on the processes inherent in large-scale curricular change, revealing similar themes of collaboration, building trust, and developing stewardship. Several decades of failed general education reform efforts came to a head at UM-Flint in the mid-2000s, when a university-wide committee charged with proposing a revised curriculum reached a stalemate. The leadership styles of the committee co-chairs, while strong in their own right, were not matching the demands of the institution-wide reform of GE. At the time, a culture of incivility pervaded the campus, fiscal constraints were significant, and a new budget system led to increased competition between our three professional schools and the College of Arts and Sciences. Our institutional culture, at that time, was defined by secrecy and suspicion, territoriality, and a lack of communication. Our top administration, the chancellor and provost, recognized our inability to work successfully toward a common institutional goal, general education reform, and decided to initiate change with a new approach. Like Kuh (1996), the administration realized that “silos” of departments, schools, or colleges tended to prevent the accomplishment of broader institutional purposes such as general education. In frustration and in hopefulness for some sort of breakthrough, the administration sent a team of five individuals to the intensive AAC&U Institute on General Education. This team was selected, in part, on the basis of representation of the various schools and college (our traditional way of decision making) but also based on the administration’s perception of faculty members’ willingness and ability to work toward institution-wide reform. The team left campus for the five-day institute with only one directive: “Go, listen, and learn.”

The institute was transformative for participants. Not only did it provide access to national experts on GE reform and dozens of other institutions facing similar challenges, but it provided an extended period of time for rich, honest, and substantive conversations about our shared hopes and dreams for general education. We had, for the first time in memory, a chance to form strong

collegial bonds, beyond our disciplines and schools/colleges. We could begin to envision collective work toward a common goal—we were developing a sense of institutional stewardship. We also learned of the critical importance of the leadership of the GE reform initiative in determining its eventual success. We began to envision a “way forward” using a new approach to leadership on our campus. The primary message we carried back from this experience was that we needed to place responsibility for success in the hands of a much larger group of faculty and staff than we had ever envisioned in our previous committee attempts. A leadership committee would need to focus as much or more on the *process* of reforming our GE curriculum (and building a sense of common institutional stewardship and trust among colleagues) as on the content of the GE curriculum. Decisions about the curriculum were of such magnitude that they required a significant investment from many faculty on campus and were doomed to failure if left in the hands of a small committee.

The institute team recognized that we needed to create with the campus as a whole the sense of excitement, engagement, institutional stewardship, and intellectual curiosity that had been aroused in us by participation in the institute. This began with a briefing following the institute, in which the institute team members presented the provost and chancellor with a set of reflections and recommendations. Prominent among these recommendations was the need to charge a leadership steering committee to *manage the process* of GE reform while adhering to principles of inclusivity and openness but to leave the development and design of the curriculum open to much broader input. Institute participants were adamant that top administration communicate to campus that the leadership steering committee would not create any curricular plans, determine the structure of the curriculum, or interfere with normal governance procedures that provided each unit with the autonomy to determine its curriculum. These principles were an important first step in building trust in a new approach to leading the GE reform efforts.

The magnitude of change required for this initiative required collaborative and flexible leadership. We sought to reach the ideal of simultaneous bottom-up and top-down leadership (Kezar, Lester, Carducci, Bertram Gallant, & Contreras McGavin, 2007). In the ensuing months of reform, the administration provided consistent support and encouragement to the institution as a whole about the significance of GE reform. Through their campus communications and their individual participation in GE reform events, the administration demonstrated a commitment to the process while encouraging *faculty* to assume a leadership role.

With leadership of GE reform squarely in the hands of the faculty, the GE Reform Steering Committee adopted a very intentional approach to leadership.

The committee was populated by individuals who both had shown a proclivity to university-wide thinking and were believed to have a good deal of respect among their peers within their respective units because we knew we faced an uphill battle in shifting perspectives and developing common goals. Further, the committee exercised a high degree of commitment to the reform process by utilizing a model of “leadership by the whole.” Committee members saw themselves as *responsible for the engagement of the rest of the campus* in the GE reform process. We developed a committee mantra that transcended our disciplinary and school/college silos, which we modeled throughout the process: “We are stewards of the university, not representatives of our respective units.”

The major task of this committee, then, was to begin to build campus trust, first among the committee itself and later throughout campus constituencies. Given the suspicious and territorial nature of the campus at that time, the establishment of trust among the faculty and between the administration and faculty was no simple task. By focusing campus discussion on “the interests and needs of our students,” we attempted to diffuse angst about credit hour losses or gains and territoriality about the curriculum. All faculty and administrators had a stake in meeting “students’ needs.” We quickly realized that we were, in fact, transforming an institutional culture at the same time we were attempting to change the general education curriculum (Awbrey, 2005; Gano-Phillips, & Barnett, 2008).

At least three distinct strategies were employed to foster the development of trust and sense of collective stewardship. First, we reduced secrecy and suspicion by *communicating openly* about every aspect of the steering committee’s work. We inundated the campus with news about the committee’s work and the campus’s progress on reform so that no individual or unit could claim a lack of information or opportunity to contribute to the reform efforts. While improving communication *from* the GE Reform Steering Committee *to* the campus was essential, that form of one-way communication was insufficient to allow us to change the campus culture (Hoff, 1999). This is where our second strategy, *engagement of campus constituents*, came into play. The GE Reform Steering Committee recognized that communication in the absence of engagement would likely still lead to faculty rejection of any curricular proposal in the final hour, because of a sense of an inability to contribute to the shaping of the proposal. Heeding Gaston and Gaff’s (2009) advice to “create new forums for the discussion of progress on curricular reform” (p. 31), we, in collaboration with our teaching and learning center, held nearly twenty campus events during the fall semester to share relevant information and to engage faculty (and sometimes staff) in discussions with one another.

In this open and engaging way, the committee set about achieving its third strategy for building trust and a sense of collective stewardship for GE reform.

We decided to *define a process and time line* explicitly for developing and selecting our new GE curriculum before we discussed the content of that curriculum (Trainor, 2004). In this way, the leadership respected faculty governance and ensured that decision making, both for the curriculum itself and for the process of arriving at that curriculum, remained in the hands of the faculty. The process that the committee proposed and the faculty eventually endorsed involved engaging faculty to develop several curricular models and resulted in the selection of a GE curriculum proposal by the end of the academic year. By focusing on the definition of the task and time line, the GE Reform Steering Committee remained true to our process-focused agenda, leaving the development of the curricular proposals themselves in the hands of the faculty as a whole. A common statement of the committee that frequently echoed across campus and which demonstrated our commitment to remaining process-focused while opening the lines of communication and engaging a substantial portion of the faculty was, "We may not know what the final curriculum will look like, but we do know when and how we are going to get there." Eight weeks after the committee began meeting, all four governance units (schools and college) had approved a common "definition of the task" and "time line" that would result in the selection of a curricular proposal by the end of the academic year. While reforms are still a long way from implementation, UM-Flint's GE Reform Steering Committee had led the campus from the brink of curricular dissolution to a new beginning for curricular reform.

### Good Leadership Took the Form of . . .

UM-Flint experienced a considerable transition in leadership philosophy while undertaking GE reform. The transition involved moving from leadership that was less intentional, focused on respecting historical traditions and patterns in decision making, and more focused on committee achievement of a curricular outcome to one that was much more intentionally focused on communication and engagement of the broader faculty in the decision making. The nature of our leadership emerged because the steering committee became focused exclusively on the *process* of institutional change without regard to the content of the curriculum. As such, the leadership was able to address long-standing cultural problems that had prevented us from achieving curricular reform in the past. We heeded Crutcher's (2006) advice, "If you find you do not like certain aspects of your institutional culture, especially with respect to intergroup relations, then you have an obligation to effect change" (p. 18). Through intentional efforts to lead by example, to open communication across campus, and to encourage engagement by a broad constituency of faculty and staff, the GE Reform Steering

Committee managed to overcome much of the distrust, apathy, and territoriality that had for so long prevented us from making curricular reform a reality.

## Leading Change at the University of Nebraska–Lincoln: The Governance Facet

The general education reform efforts at UND and UM-Flint succeeded at least in part because leaders at those institutions understood the culture within which they operated (Rountree, Tolbert, & Zerwas, 2010). UND took advantage of the evidence-based tradition of research to build collaborative leadership and trust. UM-Flint took a slightly different approach, focusing on the process of institutional change to create an intentional focus on communication and broad engagement in its reform efforts. While the lessons learned at these two institutions are applicable to other colleges and universities, the experience at the University of Nebraska–Lincoln (UNL) offers yet another facet of the model for good leadership. That is, those charged with GE reform, and we would argue other efforts involving institutional change, must recognize and respect the various political realities of their institution in the process of creating productive collaboration and the requisite trust that results in improvement (Scarnati, 2010).

The path to making a major change in an institution is not an easy road. It is achievable, however, even in the context of a large university with a complex system of governance. UNL, with an undergraduate population of about nineteen thousand undergraduate students, houses eight undergraduate colleges, which by state statute have the power to grant their own degrees and govern their own curricula.

Focusing on the academic side of leadership, one can envision an organizational chart in such an institution with a chancellor (or president) heading the university, along with the typical Office of Academic Affairs, deans of the colleges, and chairs and heads. The chart shows a pyramid of leadership, representing layers of authority. Using this chart, one might expect that the chancellor would issue the charge for change and those underneath him or her would carry out the order. The case study of UNL's general education reform indicates that leading is not as simple as the organizational chart suggests.

Looking at the structure of the institution offers a more nuanced view of leadership. The organizational chart may give you an idea of some types of power, but in the process of enacting change, power is dynamic, not static. Leaders lead. Followers follow. And depending on the decisions to be made and the stakeholders that should be involved in those decisions, sometimes leaders must follow and followers, lead. Empowering, participative leadership, according to Bass (2000), is that in which “the distinction between leader and followers

will be blurred” (p. 29). A successful enterprise of institutional change allows for this necessary interchange between the roles of leaders and followers. Such was the case for institutional change at UNL as it revised its general education program, Achievement-Centered Education (ACE), which was implemented in fall 2009.

Authority shifts and is interactive as different types of leaders emerge to take charge of various aspects of the intricate change process. The emergent forms of leadership reflect the themes of this piece: an emphasis on collaboration, development of trust among constituents, and a unified attempt by all—leaders and followers—to act as stewards of the institution as general education was revised. Here is how the notion of leadership evolved within the parameters of existing structures at UNL.

An obvious place to expect change to be initiated at a complex institution is at the top of the administration, as it was in the case of general education reform at UNL. The chancellor issued a call in 2005 for a new GE program. The chancellor and the senior vice chancellor for academic affairs set some parameters for the program. Then they charged the associate vice chancellor for academic affairs (AVCAA) and the dean of undergraduate studies with the responsibility of leading the reform effort.

On the surface, it appears that authority for change followed the organizational chart. Upon closer inspection, more intricate shifts in power occurred. Common sense dictates that this is so. Just because a chancellor wants change does not make it so. Accordingly, what happens to enable various members of the community to become change agents? In the cascade of power, the AVCAA and the dean of undergraduate studies initiated the effort by forming a small team of key faculty leaders to attend the AAC&U Institute on General Education. They then strategically formed a small, more nimble planning committee and a large, more representative advisory committee. They populated the planning groups with campus leaders and those whom they had good reason to believe were well respected at the university and represented critical constituencies, including students, faculty, advisers, and various organizations, such as Faculty Senate, whose endorsement was important. The administrative leaders made critically important decisions when they selected faculty and staff for the advisory committee whom they trusted to speak on behalf of their constituents, represent diverse perspectives, and also work collaboratively and reasonably with institutional colleagues. When these selected committee “leaders” interacted both with each other and with their constituencies, issues arose and were addressed. Conflict was embraced.

Collaboration, institutional stewardship, and the development of trust were key issues that the UNL “leadership” had to address within the context of a complex system of governance as reform moved forward. Collaboration

in the context of a complex system of governance requires that good leaders know when to assume a leadership role and when to cede their role to others as the authority for particular aspects of the project shifts. Administrators facilitated discussions about process and in doing so respected and honored faculty's authority over curricular decisions, and so on. Choosing the right people to participate and collaborate is critical to the success of the enterprise because they can speak on behalf of their individual interests and act for the good of the whole. For example, faculty leaders concurred with Leskes (2006) that "clarity of desired ends is essential to intentional educational practice" (p. 29), and thus a defining characteristic of the ACE program is that it is outcomes-based. Before determining what courses would count or how the new curriculum would be structured, the planning and advisory committees worked through a process of identifying ten learning outcomes stating what students would know and be able to produce as a result of the curriculum. Initializing the reform with the process fostered unity among the individuals of the planning and advisory committees. This unity carried over into the conversations about the structure and governance of the new program, highlighting a shift in the groups' leadership identity from the leadership of individuals representing their individual units to a collective institutional leadership. A sense of institutional stewardship had developed.

Trust is the glue that holds the political framework together. Administrators have to trust the wisdom of the leaders they select to reform general education. Leaders have to trust that their constituents will engage in meaningful conversations. Faculty members need to trust in the project's principles and a process that is incomplete. They need to be able to trust that their voices will be heard. Even when stakeholders share a common purpose, sometimes competing priorities stymie progress toward reform. Some amount of disagreement is healthy for change because it forces reconciliation to keep the process moving forward. We found that this cycle of conflict and resolution allowed us to build a stronger program. The learning outcomes provided an agreed-upon foundation that could be referred back to at these times of disagreement. This foundation fostered a trust that stakeholders were moving toward a mutual goal that enabled them to see the good of the whole, to tend the public garden of the university and not just their own small patch.

Issues of trust can be seen in a few examples regarding the process of general education reform. One turning point in gaining faculty support for proposed reforms illustrates how communication plays a key role in developing trust. The committees that developed the governing documents for the reform thought that faculty had been invited into the process through efforts such as Blackboard conversations and trusted that the college representatives would communicate with their constituents. However, the Faculty Senate executive committee was

convinced that these efforts were inadequate and exerted its voice. In response, the committees offered faculty forums, with a good, but not an overwhelming, response. Those forums were critical in getting a read on what aspects of the plan needed further development and where communication breakdowns were occurring. Faculty Senate leadership played a crucial role, and the planning committees followed their advice to build trust among faculty who were at times skeptical that reform was even needed.

The process of approving the governing documents for the new general education program provides another example of the need to develop trust. Based on recommendations from AAC&U consultants, the two planning committees hammered out four governing documents. An AAC&U consultant also recommended a two-stage voting process that required faculty in each college to vote on one set of governing documents at once and then a second set a year later. The first set of documents consisted of the list of learning outcomes and the structural criteria. The second explained the criteria and process for certifying courses as well as an assessment document (available at <http://ace.unl.edu>). This strategy was key because it was not until the first vote that faculty seemed to understand that GE reform was imminent and they better get involved.

This split vote prompted previously uninterested faculty and their units to engage in the process, and several did so. Colleges with little resistance to the proposals voted first, followed by the more difficult votes. Needless to say, faculty members did not always agree on what needed to be done or the wording of the outcomes. Faculty in six of the eight colleges passed the first set of governing documents. Another college passed it only after the dean interceded and offered the idea of approval “in principle” while encouraging the formation of an ad hoc committee to take leadership by expressing their concerns with the proposals and make recommendations for changes. The final college rejected the first set of proposals, but once their concerns were heard and addressed by the faculty chair, the AVCAA, and the dean of undergraduate studies, the faculty members in that college voted again and passed the first set of proposals. In both of these colleges, faculty concerns called for a greater vision rather than disputing the documents. The airing of these concerns early in the process allowed for the second set of documents to be approved unanimously. Faculty were convinced to trust in the process of developing the program, even though they voted without knowing all of the details that would eventually be part of all four governing documents.

### Good Leadership Took the Form of . . .

A nuanced understanding of the meaning of good leadership developed as UNL reformed its general education program. Good leaders recognize and respect



the political realities of the institution, developing trust and creating a vision that can be achieved by shared ideas and a guiding framework of what students should know and be able to do as a result of the program, rather than only being preoccupied with more personal gains and losses at the unit level.

Who has the authority to create institutional change? The person at the top of the organizational chart can initiate the change, but for change to be fully accomplished, it requires recognition and respect of the leadership of various stakeholders and allows leaders at all levels of the institution to emerge at key points, in turn creating a sense of shared governance and trust. To accomplish institutional change, it was critical at UNL to recognize that the administration has the authority to set the vision and framework for the process, colleges have authority over curricular matters, and departments wield power to address pedagogical issues. Having the right people working on the project and recognizing the authority they possessed were critical to the success of the enterprise.

In the end, this case study allows us to define collaborative leadership not just as people working together. In the midst of institutional change, collaborative leadership involves dynamic, interchanging roles between leaders and followers. Rather than static layers of leaders and subleaders who act in a linear way according to an organizational chart, institutional change results from an active and iterative interchange, with leaders emerging and submerging as turning points in the process require them to become change agents.

## Conclusion

To say that good leadership is critical to successful general education reform is essentially stating the obvious, yet *the more we explore the setbacks and failures that institutions suffer in their attempts to make large-scale programmatic curricular change, the more they point to a lack of attention to how leadership impacts the change process*. If we are to make meaningful and lasting progress in creating signature GE programs that reflect the educational realities and demands of the twenty-first century, then we must consider new forms of leadership that will help us get there.

The case studies presented in this article illustrate the larger point that *collaborative leadership, as an alternative to either strictly top-down or bottom-up single-leader approaches, attempts to embrace the common good and empower the entire institution in the decision-making process*. A collaborative leadership approach requires flexibility and a willingness to consider new and different approaches to large-scale institutional reform. Andrea Leskes (2006) argues “that nimbleness, self-reflection, and a willingness to change with the times are characteristic not just of the students we want to produce, but of the institutions we need to

build” (p. 33). As leaders of GE reform movements embrace these characteristics and collaborate in setting a reform agenda, the likelihood of meaningful reform increases.

An essential component of this collaborative leadership involves the development of trust and a common purpose in revitalizing the GE curriculum, and *it is through engagement of a wide variety of campus constituents that such trust and a sense of institutional stewardship are achieved*. As illustrated by the three case examples, the development of trust takes varying amounts of time and effort on different campuses, depending on the history of relationships among groups at the time that GE reform begins. So, too, does the development of a sense of institutional stewardship. In some institutions, individual or disciplinary interests dominate decision making, while at other institutions, decisions are routinely made with the best interests of students in mind. *Institutional collaboration, stewardship, and trust are built in a variety of ways, by utilizing local data about student learning, by increasing campus communication and engagement, by working within governance structures and political realities, and by using processes that foster campus unity*, as illustrated in the case examples. Despite the differences in focus, a common leadership theme emerges that attention must be paid to building trust and a sense of institutional stewardship through campus engagement.

A successful collaborative leadership team, as it coalesces, develops this sense of stewardship, and it serves as a model for the larger campus community. In the leadership team, members come to understand and appreciate one another’s perspectives, to see their *common* purposes and values, and to show a desire to make a change for the better. This sense of enthusiasm and hopefulness can spread infectiously to the rest of the campus and help to develop the will to change. Ultimately, movement toward consensus and eventually to critical decisions about the curricular content and implementation is built upon a foundation of mutual trust and shared visions of stewardship.

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