

# Toward Intentionality and Transparency: Analysis and Reflection on the Process of General Education Reform

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In 2000, the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) launched its multiyear initiative, Greater Expectations: The Commitment to Quality as a Nation Goes to College. The University of Nebraska–Lincoln (UNL) was one of sixteen colleges and universities from across the nation selected to participate in the Greater Expectations Consortium on Quality Education. This initiative intersected with structural and cultural changes at our university. Involvement with the Greater Expectations initiative and subsequent AAC&U programs provided a number of us at UNL multiple opportunities to interact with colleagues from a variety of institutions through consortium meetings and symposia. We were exposed to new ways of thinking and approaches to undergraduate education, which in turn contributed to our ability as an institution to articulate and develop a coherent strategy toward continuous improvement of the campus learning environment.

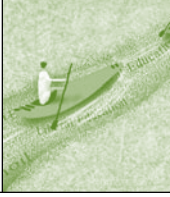
The University of Nebraska–Lincoln is a different institution than it was in 2000. We have benefitted from strong, focused administrative leadership whose priorities are continuous improvement of our research, graduate, and undergraduate programs. Reports from three key faculty task forces (available online at [www.unl.edu/svcaa/reports/](http://www.unl.edu/svcaa/reports/)) provided the campus community with vision and guidance for raising both the intellectual engagement and achievement of the entire campus community. In addition, there have been purposeful structural changes and reallocation of resources within the institution to provide greater visibility and support to the success of our undergraduate students. For example, the office of undergraduate studies, led by an academic dean, was established in 2003 with responsibilities for all academic programs and initiatives outside

the eight undergraduate colleges. This includes a diverse set of responsibilities and yet provides a coherent structure, leadership, and oversight for institutional programs.

The campus is committed to a strategic planning process, first introduced in 2004. At UNL, strategic planning is a ‘grassroots’ process, beginning with academic priorities established at the unit level and then advancing through the college level. Deans present their college’s academic priorities and benchmarks for success, which in turn are incorporated into the campus-wide strategic plan. The strategic planning process established the blueprint for prioritizing efforts on campus. As a result of the planning, the chancellor in 2005 recommended reform of our general education program, partly because the curriculum was viewed as complicated and unattractive to students transferring to our university and to current students transferring from one college to another within the institution. The major work by those in the university community to accomplish this task provides evidence that one of the major changes in the university is a shift to become more intentional about what students should learn.

## LET THE PROCESS BEGIN

The formal process for reform of our general education reorganization began in 2005, when the chancellor and senior vice chancellor for academic affairs (SVCAA) appointed the associate vice chancellor of academic affairs and the dean of undergraduate studies to lead the reform process. In addition, four faculty members representing key campus constituencies were chosen to comprise the initial planning group, known as the General Education Planning Team (GEPT).



The GEPT attended the 2005 AAC&U Institute on General Education at Salve Regina University in Rhode Island and interacted with institute faculty and colleagues from across the country whose institutions were also involved in transforming their general education programs. GEPT returned with a plan and timeline for organizing the campus-wide initiative. The plan called for a new approach to designing general education; that is, one based upon student learning outcomes rather than a menu of particular courses. GEPT also recommended that the SVCAA, in consultation with the academic deans, form a working advisory group to GEPT including faculty representation from each undergraduate college, representatives from student government, office of admissions, professional academic advising and the director of institutional assessment. This group, known as the General Education Advisory Council (GEAC), was chaired by a university distinguished professor known for his excellence in teaching and commitment to undergraduate students.

GEAC was charged to design a general education program that was coherent, transparent, flexible, student-centered, transferable among the eight undergraduate colleges and consistent with national contemporary thinking about what students should know upon graduation. This was no small task. The first year in consultation with the undergraduate colleges in the university, various faculty groups, and students, the GEAC developed institutional objectives and related student learning outcomes. The GEAC began that work by posing a basic question to our faculty and students: What should all students—regardless of their major—know or be able to do by graduation? A small group of faculty participated in the 2006 AAC&U General Education institute with the goal of developing a plan for assessing such a

program based upon student learning outcomes.

The end product of the GEAC committee, Achievement-Centered Education (ACE) ([ace.unl.edu](http://ace.unl.edu)), is a program based on four institutional objectives and ten corresponding, assessable student learning outcomes (SLOs) along with documents guiding the development and governance of the program. Objectives are developmental and designed to be achieved over the course of students' college experience and reinforced by accompanying SLOs and work in the majors. GEAC tried to address faculty and student suggestions by constructing a program that helps achieve outcomes that will be visible and relevant.

In January 2008, the faculty of the University of Nebraska-Lincoln voted to approve the ACE program for implementation in the fall 2009. It is a work in progress and always will be, as its foundation is based upon continuous improvement of the undergraduate learning experience. It requires active participation

conversations about general education, we realized that any new efforts to reform UNL's program must communicate the intentionality of our efforts on many levels. Integrating lessons learned by the smaller teams, who attended the AAC&U Summer Institute on General Education in 2005 and 2006, and other national and local conversations about quality education taught us that intentional learning requires transparency, strategic choices, inclusive decisions, and revolutionary thinking. Guided by these values, we hoped to be able to produce a general education program that would prepare students for challenges they will face in the twenty-first century.

### BEING TRANSPARENT

GEAC spent two years developing and fine-tuning UNL's plan. It was critical that we made the reform effort, not simply the end result, visible to all stakeholders including students, faculty, administrators, staff, and those from external institutions who were interested in particular aspects of

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by faculty and students. To state that all our faculty are thrilled with this new approach to general education would be inaccurate; however, the process for the development and implementation of this new program paved the way for our campus to view general education differently and, we believe, more in line with what our students need to thrive in a rapidly changing and, at times, unstable world.

### MAKING GENERAL EDUCATION VISIBLE AND VALUABLE

Prompted by the national and local

the new general education program, such as transfer-related issues. With the belief that contributions from all areas could help construct a strong program, GEAC members listened to many voices, heard their concerns and ideas, and ensured that all materials and meetings were available to the university community through our Web site.

To create transparency, much emphasis has been placed on online and face-to-face communication. An interim director for general education was appointed to guide the implementation and facilitate



the process. As the program builds, the ACE Web site continues to be a central location for ACE-related resources, such as information about the course certification process, transfer policy, FAQs, updates, and lists of groups consulted. Equally important in our efforts to provide an ACE online library and archive are our efforts to reach to various constituencies on and off campus to communicate in person about concerns. Communication remains a critical component and efforts are wide-ranging and ongoing. Some constituencies include curriculum committees, student government, advisers and faculty senate, and leaders at other institutions.

In addition to talking with the stakeholders mentioned above about general education, efforts are being made to ensure that students understand the intentionality of the ACE program. Before developing ACE, GEAC listened to students and heard that they did not always understand why they had to take a science or a modern language class. We heard some say they took their “generals” so they could get them over with and move on to the courses they were interested in, and some told us they had the

impression that research took priority over undergraduate education. It was, frankly, shocking to hear how some students described their academic experience under our old general education program. By developing outcomes that align with the Liberal Education and America’s Promise (LEAP) initiative (see table 1), the new general education program’s institutional objectives and learning outcomes now emphasize ethical and civic responsibility, global awareness and diversity as well as other skills and abilities. With the goal of helping students understand how general education relates to their majors, the program asks students to integrate the knowledge and abilities developed in the student learning outcomes with other aspects of their education.

Intentionality goes beyond simply asking providers of education to teach to outcomes rather than the old subject-driven method. A critical component of intentionality involves making sure students know why they are being asked to learn certain outcomes and reminding faculty who teach to have that discussion with students. It requires making intentions visible not just to faculty, but to

students as well. It is important to remind faculty and students what learning is to occur. To make learning intentional at the course level, every course certified for inclusion in the ACE program must clearly identify in the syllabus:

- The learning outcome(s) that would be satisfied by the course
- A brief description of the opportunities this course would provide for students to acquire the knowledge or skills necessary to achieve the learning outcome(s)
- A brief description of the graded assignments that the instructor(s) will use to assess students’ achievement of the outcome(s)

## TYING TO ACADEMIC STRATEGIC PLANNING

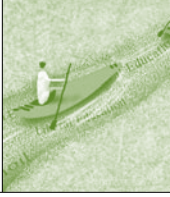
The University of Nebraska-Lincoln embarked on an iterative strategic planning process to clarify the shared vision and best assess how to achieve that vision. Aligned with the university’s mission of learning, discovery, and engagement, the institution’s two overarching priorities are undergraduate education and research. Clearly, transforming general education supports the academic mission.

Gano-Phillips and Barnett observed that process is a key to success as university administrators and intellectual leadership forge new pathways for assessable general education programs (2008). We would extend their argument by asserting that the new general education program based on achieving learning outcomes also provides a valuable strategic focus to help leaders build a cohesive, coherent education.

ACE’s new outcomes model offered a focal point for both the planning stages and the ongoing implementation phase. The thematic approach has helped make our efforts strategic and efficient. Preserving the goal of achieving an outcomes-based education throughout the implementation

TABLE 1: LEAP/ACE REFLECTION FROM UNL WEB SITE

AAC&U Essential Learning Outcomes	UNL’s Institutional Learning Objectives
Knowledge of Human Cultures and the Physical and Natural World	Build knowledge of diverse peoples and cultures and of the natural and physical world through the study of mathematics, sciences and technologies, histories, humanities, arts, social sciences, and human diversity
Intellectual and Practical Skills	Develop intellectual and practical skills, including proficiency in written, oral, and visual communication; inquiry techniques; critical and creative thinking; quantitative applications; information assessment; teamwork; and problem solving
Personal and Social Responsibility	Exercise individual and social responsibilities through the study of ethical principles and reasoning, application of civic knowledge, interaction with diverse cultures, and engagement with global issues.
Integrative Learning	Integrate these abilities and capacities, adapting them to new settings, questions, and responsibilities.



phase has added focus to the process as decisions have been made. Specific activities stimulating changes that are occurring within the university and beyond are offered as evidence of initial success of the approach:

- Specially designed course certification and recertification processes focused on helping students achieve outcomes and assessing their progress guided the general education committee as it considered courses that populate the program
- Course facilitators, selected by the dean of each undergraduate college, helped faculty understand the goals of ACE and engage in the course submission process
- The focused approach prompted the university's assessment team to modify the infrastructure of its online assessment tool
- University administrators seized the opportunity to sponsor outside speakers and a competitive grant opportunity for faculty that would contribute to building the program and changing the university climate
- A faculty team won outside grant funding to help pilot a general education writing assessment system
- The focus on outcomes spurred our decision to have the dean of undergraduate studies, the general education director, and the university's academic transfer coordinator visit all community colleges in the state and a number of other higher learning institutions to talk about our brand of general education to see if there are opportunities for collaboration

The strategic process has been both successful and challenging. It is far from complete in transforming the culture on campus, and faculty members have approached the efforts with varying levels of acceptance and enthusiasm. At its core, the ACE initiative has given faculty

opportunities to refocus their thinking and do their jobs in new ways.

### BEING INCLUSIVE

Being intentional means that we need to include many voices in our decisions about general education reform. It does not take much imagination to begin to realize the complexity and enormity of the project that needs to be undertaken if the transformation to a new general education program is to be successful in achieving its goals of an outcomes-based focus, especially in an institution with 24,000 students. Establishing and nurturing mutually beneficial relationships among an array of constituents—both internal and external to an institution—is essential to the process.

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Those involved with the process at UNL recognized the importance of communicating with the many stakeholders involved *within* the university, such as students, faculty, admissions officers, advisers, registration and records personnel, administrators, and campus leaders of all sorts. From the beginning of the process it was clear that creating the culture in which the new program could thrive requires including *external* constituencies such as community and state colleges in conversations about the new program as well.

In visiting the chief academic officers and admissions staff at nearly all institutions of higher learning in the state—community colleges, a state college system, private institutions, and a land-grant state university—a team

from UNL learned that many other institutions were in the process of revising their general education programs as well and exchanged concerns about many aspects of the process, including transfer students. Sharing information proved mutually beneficial, as change often occurs simultaneously at different institutions, and we all want to improve transfer students' experience.

### BEING REVOLUTIONARY

Through LEAP, AAC&U invites institutions to break out of academic silos and align teaching and learning practices with the realities of the new global century. This request asks colleges and universities to rethink their organization and outdated “modular curriculum, organized a century

ago and still largely intact, which has become increasingly dysfunctional” (AAC&U 2007, 19). As new general education programs attempt to meet AAC&U's challenge, a new question has emerged: Who owns the truth about how courses and curriculum should be categorized?

Shedding traditional menu models replete with courses attached to disciplinary labels, the new general education program designers at UNL deliberately avoided using departmental tags to avoid falling into the silo trap. As the general education committee considers courses to populate the program, it is faced with new questions about whether the course fits the outcome. What appears to be emerging as the answer to these questions is that each discipline thinks it owns the truth about its worth





# ANALYSIS

and place in the academy. Focusing on programmatic outcomes can help settle territorial disputes.

In the old model, arts and sciences colleges traditionally defined what was a science course or a writing course or a humanities course or a social science course, and consequently, what was included in general education programs. This paradigm is shifting. Who says writing is the sole domain of the English department? Can't journalism or business writing courses also fulfill writing outcomes? What about science? Will an entomology course in an agriculture college in the institution meet acceptable standards for science-related outcomes and be accepted by the broader campus community? Does an anthropology course achieve an outcome that relates to using scientific methods if it examines human behavior that is the focus of a different outcome? Does a course in music fulfill an arts outcome simply by definition of its title and home department? Redefining general education by outcome rather than by subject can be challenging. And so can altering the perspectives of faculty who have long resided in an old system.

At the heart of transforming UNL's culture to an outcomes-based general education program is a stimulating and sometimes difficult discussion that forces

faculty to face deeply rooted fundamental assumptions about education. In the face of critics who claim that the new system of general education does not substantially differ from the old one, we argue otherwise. The focus on achieving outcomes rather than completing a prescribed list of courses demands transformational thinking. It requires reexamining how disciplines are defined and whether the traditional structure of classifying courses of studies as humanities, sciences, social sciences, and the arts needs to be expanded to accommodate today's realities. It challenges the academic community to consider alternative ways of thinking about common theories, methods, techniques and problems. It may not be an easy path, but it will ultimately be worth the journey as we engage in discussions about intentional learning, which will improve higher learning institutions to better serve our students in the twenty-first century. ■

## REFERENCES

- Association of American Colleges and Universities. 2007. *College Learning for the New Global Century*. Washington DC: Association of American Colleges and Universities.
- Gano-Phillips, S., and R. W. Barnett. 2008. Against all odds: Transforming institutional culture. *Liberal Education* 94 (2): 36-41.



## AAC&U MEETINGS

### ANNUAL MEETING

**READY OR NOT:  
Global Challenges, College  
Learning, and America's Promise**  
January 21-24, 2009  
Seattle, Washington

### NETWORK MEETINGS

**GENERAL EDUCATION,  
ASSESSMENT, AND THE  
LEARNING STUDENTS NEED**  
February 26-28, 2009  
Baltimore, Maryland

**SHAPING FACULTY ROLES IN A  
TIME OF CHANGE:  
Leadership for Student Learning**

April 2-4, 2009  
San Diego, California

### SUMMER INSTITUTES

**GENERAL EDUCATION AND  
ASSESSMENT**  
May 29-June 3, 2009  
Minneapolis, Minnesota

**GREATER EXPECTATIONS**  
June 17-21, 2009  
University of Vermont

**ENGAGING DEPARTMENTS**  
July 8-12, 2009  
University of Pennsylvania

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