

## A 'Core Conversancies' Curriculum for General Education at DU

(Submitted as an Amendment to the GERI Proposal, 1 February 2020)

### I. Rationale

This model for General Education is based on concepts proposed some years ago by the philosopher Rudolf Weingartner in his book *Undergraduate Education: Goals and Means* (1992). Weingartner distinguishes between *Proficiencies*, *Competencies*, and *Conversancies*. Proficiencies include basic writing, math, and language skills. Competencies cover learning in the academic major. The pedagogically distinctive element of the model—Conversancies—implies the cultivation, through discussion-rich seminars, studios, and other methods, of an intellect that enables a student to see a major field's relations to other worlds, and to imagine new worlds. For Weingartner, the “pedagogic road to conversancy” is best served by courses that address big topics, issues, and problems.

Weingartner's prioritization of conversancy as an educational value is echoed by other philosophers like Ruth Grant and Richard Rorty. Ruth Grant (in 'The Ethics of Talk: Classroom Conversation and Democratic Politics', *Teachers College Record*, 1996) considers "good conversation" to be a "non-partisan, ethical activity necessary for effective public discourse in a democratic society." In her words, it "establishes our sense of ourselves in relation to society as a whole...to be part of the conversation is to be part of the community." For Richard Rorty (in *Philosophy and The Mirror of Nature*, 1979), "edifying conversation" is a discourse in which we join with others in an attempt to "make sense of the multidimensional aspects of human experience." It is a project of finding "new, better, more interesting, and more fruitful ways of speaking." The conversation involves "being prepared to listen and learn from others, as well as to respond and reconstruct our own views, as we investigate together what it means to be a human being and how this might be brought about through education." These ideas about conversation as an anchoring educational trope are deeply rooted in an honorable and extremely influential tradition of pragmatist thought beginning with William James and John Dewey.

The Conversancies Model is based on what American universities have always done best: create and disseminate knowledge. It respects and prioritizes the transmission of accumulated knowledge in the liberal arts and sciences. However, the model also respects and invites contributions from other professional disciplines and fields of inquiry. It takes for granted the value of critical and creative thinking. It respects new initiatives to *co-produce* knowledge with internal and external partners and collaborators. The curriculum aims to foster self-aware and civically-minded citizens who are simultaneously informed and interesting conversationalists. Someone who's proficient in basic skills and competent in the conventions of a particular discipline isn't necessarily worth talking to, keeping company with, or hiring (e.g., see Mark Bauerlein, 'The Underestimation of Cultural Literacy', *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, June 8, 2009).

The Conversancies Model restores a high-end, thematic general education curriculum akin to what was successfully created under University Requirements (2000-2010). It builds on foundational learning in the great domains of human knowledge as well as in the major. The distinctive Conversancies element of the curriculum is back-loaded in the junior and senior years to address the new reality of high student mobility; i.e., transfer students who have acquired proficiencies and competencies at other institutions before settling in at DU, and high school graduates bringing advanced placement credit. Back-loading also capitalizes on student gains in cognitive maturity over four years, as established by the vast literature on Reflective Judgement.

The concept of Conversancies dovetails with the original, inclusive intent of DU's Public Good vision. The Public Good vision that was formulated by the University Planning and Advisory Council (UPAC) in 2001 was driven by two major concerns: (1) to incorporate into DU's educational mission the democratizing ethos of the great land grant universities and private urban institutions oriented toward serving their neighborhoods and the wider common good (e.g., New York University, University of Southern California, Syracuse University, University of Pennsylvania, Emory University, and others), and (2) to legitimize emerging scholarly commitments, at DU and elsewhere, to community-engaged research. At the same time, UPAC identified DU's distinctiveness as lying not with a Public Good vision, but rather with the potential of its organizational structure—a constellation of liberal arts disciplines and professional schools—to create intellectual “synergies” between different kinds of learning, including liberal and professional learning. The Conversancies Curriculum is capable of producing such synergies by including professional school faculty in the delivery of General Education at the high end Core Conversancies level (more below). The Curriculum is consistent with many aspects of the Impact 2025 strategic plan. It responds to widespread national fears that we're becoming a civically-illiterate, scientifically-uninformed, and interculturally-incompetent people. The Conversancies Model is taxonomically unique. It would put a distinctive stamp on DU's Gen Ed program that is consistent with the university's structural uniqueness. It speaks to DU's institutional identity, and has “branding” potential.

## **II. Structure**

The curriculum is structured into ***Core Competencies*** (basic proficiencies and literacies in the liberal arts and sciences) and ***Core Conversancies*** (high-end, theme-based encounters between and across disciplines, professions, and emerging transdisciplinary fields of inquiry).

### **A. Core Competencies (44-52 credits; the precise number and distribution of credits in WRIT, QUAN, LANG and potentially new areas like Information Literacy, Visual Literacy, and Computing to be further negotiated by faculty)**

FSEM: 4 credits.

WRIT: 4 credits.

QUAN: 8 credits

LANG: 4-12 credits.

AHUM: 8 credits: two courses cultivating shared knowledge around fundamental questions, texts, and concepts.

SOCS: 8 credits: two courses cultivating shared knowledge around fundamental questions, texts, and concepts.

NATS: 8 credits: two course sequence providing broad-based scientific literacy focused on Big Questions, Ideas, and Concepts that would better prepare students for the Conversancies curriculum.

\* **Note:** this part of the curriculum remains grounded in the disciplines and current practice. However, it should modify whatever faculty collectively deem is necessary to accommodate credits that students bring from elsewhere and thereby limit redundancies between high school, community college, and university learning. It should also be revised to strengthen particular institutional commitments to learning around diversity, equity, inclusion, and whatever other subjects faculty believe are important. New pedagogies might include the use of key concepts that crosscut courses, shared texts or collections of articles, and possibly even an updated 21<sup>st</sup> century version of “Great Books.”

### **B. Core Conversancies (12 credits)**

Students take one seminar (or, “studio”—see Rebecca Chopp, ‘Remaking, Renewing, Reimagining: The Liberal Arts College Takes Advantage of Change’, in *Remaking College, Innovation and the Liberal Arts*, 2014) in each of three high end Conversancy categories, choosing from menus created by faculty across the university including the professional schools. Including professional school faculty in the delivery of Gen Ed would be a major change from the past. However, professional school faculty would be involved only as the capacity of those units allows. It would certainly be a win for the professional schools if our most talented undergraduate students were inspired to undertake graduate study here on campus rather than going elsewhere. Experienced and trusted adjunct faculty are also welcome to teach these courses. This would help relieve the disproportionate staffing burden that general education places on faculty in the College of Arts, Humanities, and Social Sciences.

Particular course topics and emphases are open, but relate to category themes *as broadly understood*. Courses are designed and titled to excite students. Most importantly, Conversancies courses are explicitly designed to *test the relevance* of a student’s major field of study to bigger, transdisciplinary issues and problems. In this sense, the Core Conversancies piece of the curriculum serves as a Gen Ed “Capstone” by other means, and is geared toward integrating liberal learning with learning in the major and in the professions. Classroom pedagogies (writing intensive, discussion intensive, lab intensive, field intensive, graphics/design intensive, performance intensive) are selected by the instructor and tailored to the specific objectives and learning outcomes of the course. Team teaching across academic units is encouraged and supported (but not required) in all three categories, so as to better illustrate the generative power of conversation and the fundamental unity of knowledge. Category themes might be pitched as follows, in keeping with recent AAC&U reports about the subject areas in which college graduates are known to be weak:

- CONV xxxx: An Interdisciplinary “Knowledge Bridging” Seminar/Studio. Especially suited for faculty teaching in the natural sciences, humanities, and STEM/“STEAM” disciplines. *Serves the cause of general scientific literacy as well as “visual literacy.”*
- CONV xxxx: A Civic Engagement or Applied Scholarship Seminar/Studio. Especially suited for faculty teaching in the professional schools, social sciences, and the arts, including those keen on civic engagement, community partnerships, and service learning. Service learning is not required, however. Courses in or about “citizen science” would fit here. *Serves the cause of general civic literacy.*
- CONV xxxx: A Global Awareness or Cultural Diversity Seminar/Studio. Especially suited for faculty teaching in the Arts, Humanities, Social Sciences, and professional schools such as JKIS, the College of Education, and the School of Social Work. Can be satisfied by a Study Abroad program. *Serves the cause of general cultural literacy.*

**Note:** This curriculum reflects priorities of the university’s Vision, Values, Mission, and Goals. It is consistent with the Impact 2025 strategic plan. It is based on a format that has worked at DU in the past, for both faculty and students. It aligns with current AAC&U manifestos about what’s needed in general education going forward. It addresses workforce needs identified by AAC&U surveys of executives and hiring managers. In fact, the notion of “Conversancies” dovetails with the increasing importance to employers of oral communication as a desired skill (see *Fulfilling the American Dream: Liberal Education and the Future of Work*, AAC&U, 2018). If desired by faculty, the three very general Conversancy categories described above can be given greater specificity akin to the old University Requirements’ specification of the high end Core themes of *Identity, Community, and Change*. For example, themes like *Sustainability, Globalization, Urbanization, Technoethics, Citizenship, Pluralism*, and any number of others would work as alternatives and accommodate research and teaching interests known to exist across the arts, humanities, sciences, and professional schools. Themes are possible that would easily invite participation from STEM and natural sciences faculty. If necessary, special incentives and/or faculty development opportunities could be created to boost participation from the sciences, engineering, and professional schools. Participation of science, engineering, and computer science faculty means that a fair number of non-science majors will gain another 4 credits of science education, and conceivably even more credits, at the Conversancies level. Graduate students employed in the sciences continue their GTAs at the Conversancies level, regardless of class size.

**TOTAL: 56-64 credits, pending negotiations at the Competencies level that would maintain or even decrease the current size of the Gen Ed curriculum overall.**