

ON TEACHING

**“Pressure Points,” “Opportunities” and the Voices of Our Students:
Why UND Undertook Gen Ed Reform
by Anne Kelsch**

In 2000 a group of ten UND faculty members embarked—and the association with voyages is a good one—on a long term interview project to gain better understanding of our students’ learning as it relates to the cross-disciplinary goals of our General Education program. Despite being a faculty member who honestly could not have told you what our gen ed program goals were at first, I got drawn deeply into the project because I cared a lot about how my students were learning both in the introductory history courses I taught, which had been validated for GE credit, and in the other classes my students referred to as their “generals.”

As a member of the Bush Longitudinal Study Team I interviewed the same ten students each semester for

the entirety of their time at UND. Over four to six years I got to know these students quite well and they told me things about their learning that they would not typically have shared with a faculty member. They made it clear that they saw our GE program as just an institutional hurdle, a hodgepodge of classes from here and there that did not relate to one another, which everyone felt the need to “get out of the way.” They were only vaguely aware that our program had higher learning goals—not too surprising since a number of faculty shared that same foggy sense—and felt the classes themselves really were not that important in terms of their overall academic aspirations.

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**The Development of Essential Studies
by Lori Robison**

When the twenty-eight members of the Task Force on General Education began meeting in the summer and fall of 2005, the first job in front of us was to join the national conversation on General Education and to learn more about the assessment of student learning in general education that had already been completed at UND. We read research on pedagogy and general education, explored programs at other colleges and universities, met with representatives of schools and departments across campus, and became familiar with the findings of the Longitudinal study. We were a group composed of faculty, staff, administrators, and students who all had involvement, in one way or another, with general education, and we were able to bring a variety of perspectives to our discussions.

While it became clear, especially in the early months of working together, that we held some very different opinions—opinions that could lead to some fairly heated debates—about what the particular features of an ideal general education program would be, it also became clear that we all shared a strong belief in the fundamental value of a liberal arts education. We all also became convinced, especially as we learned more about UND’s program and about general education initiatives being proposed at other schools, that we could do a much better job of not only educating students in the program but also of articulating to students, to colleagues, and to the people of North Dakota the value of general education.

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“To teach is to learn twice.”

—Joseph Joubert

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When we introduced the cross-disciplinary goals to the students and probed them about learning associated with those goals in GE classes, it became apparent that much of the goal language had little meaning for them. So if asked about developing the ability to “think creatively” in GE courses, students might lament having had no experience with creative thinking since they hadn’t taken an art course. One disturbing comment team members heard repeatedly was that students did not see the point of our “understanding other cultures” goal and they had had very few opportunities to learn around that goal in courses they took for GE credit (even though faculty often claimed to value the goal highly). In fact, that goal was the one that students understood and valued least. I could go on about our findings and it is important to note that there was some encouraging news, too. For example, students valued communication and critical thinking highly and could speak particularly well about their learning around those goals in their major classes.

These on-going interview conversations granted those of us in the study team tremendous insight into student attitudes about their learning. But equally worthy of note is what we learned about ourselves. Fairly quickly an evolution in thinking began among those of us doing the interviews. We went from being very frustrated and openly annoyed about the educational values our students expressed to becoming increasingly and uncomfortably aware that while our frustration was appropriate it was perhaps at least partially misdirected. Since we believed that we were here to teach our students and since these goals were important enough to be central to our entire undergraduate curriculum (with the courses in the program making up almost one-third of classes most students take), we had to accept some responsibility if students did not understand or

appreciate the goals—especially after accumulating 36 hours of courses which had been validated for inclusion in the program based on the faculty’s claim to address those very goals. Could we really expect a student who had taken the standard GE course—a large lecture class with multiple choice exams focused solely on introductory level disciplinary content— to be articulate about the academic process of “Recognizing and Evaluating Choices and their Consequences”? Did any of their “generals” actually directly address what that meant academically or even ask students to practice that skill? Was it really so surprising then, that when asked about that goal, students spoke in terms of drinking and socializing?

For me and many of us involved in the study the need to reform how we at UND think about, talk about and teach our GE courses became undeniable. We presented our findings to the campus and many tough but good conversations ensued. Other factors, clear “pressure points,” also drove reform. Nationally constituents and legislatures demanded greater accountability in higher education. In 2003 a visit from UND’s regional accrediting agency, the Higher Learning Commission, made clear that our lack of direct assessment of student learning in our GE program could not continue and a focused visit would follow to check our progress toward changing that. And while most institutions finding themselves in that unhappy situation—and there are many—adopt cookie cutter standardized tests, we did not succumb to that potentially problematic “quick fix.” Volunteer faculty groups lead by Joan Hawthorne, who oversees our assessment efforts at UND, undertook qualitative studies of students’ best work to measure and evaluate their critical thinking and communication skills in meaningful ways.

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Essential Studies Model Projects Grants
Electronic Submissions due by Noon April 22, 2008

In support of the new Essential Studies (ES) Program, the Faculty Instructional Development Committee (FIDC) has made available a targeted Model Projects program. This program is for the development or redevelopment of “model” courses, focusing explicitly on the following ES goals and addressing identified needs:

- quantitative reasoning;
- creative thinking;
- information literacy;
- global social-cultural diversity;
- U.S. social-cultural diversity;
- capstone courses (addressing at least two ES goals which include critical thinking and communication as well as those listed here).

Funding of \$3000 for 4 week projects or \$1500 for 2 week projects may be requested. By the conclusion of the project, courses should be ready to be offered within the new ES program. Applicants should commit to attendance at a “Focus on Course Development for Essential Studies” luncheon (May 2); participation in an August “show & tell” session with other faculty engaged in model course development; and participation in an ES Summit in the fall. Full application guidelines and evaluation criteria are available at the OID webpage (<http://www.und.edu/dept/oid/index.htm>). Due to time constraints proposals must be submitted electronically as an email attachment to oid@und.nodak.edu. If you have questions or want more information call Anne Kelsch at 777-4233.

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The “understanding other cultures” goal required a particularly innovative approach in order to collect useful direct data, and in fact that work has received national attention. An inventory of a sample of student transcripts made clear that students were not getting adequate “hits” on certain goals in the courses they were taking for GE credit. So we responded to various “pressure points” by creating opportunities to genuinely learn about our students’ work and by inviting faculty to participate in intellectually engaging conversations

about what we do.

Data began to be compiled and it became clear that UND needed to take this information and use it to do a better job: to “close the loop.” So when a Task Force was created in 2005 to rethink our GE program, we had the huge advantage of being able to go beyond a teeming and vibrant national conversation about best practices. We had very real and useful information—often in students’ own voices—about our students and their learning in our program.

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For the Task Force, the most pressing concerns that we needed to address through the creation of a new program were the following:

1) We knew we needed to address a lack of awareness from students, faculty, and the whole campus about our general education program. Advisors and faculty members supported the *idea* of liberal learning, and yet often resorted to a rhetoric of “checking boxes” or “getting your requirements out of the way” when asked to address the specifics of UND’s program. Students were often unable to explain why they would want to—or even why they should—take courses that did not seem to directly address their career aspirations. Faculty members had been teaching their general education courses as introductions to particular disciplines without necessarily thinking about how to make those courses part of a larger, more coherent general education experience. Many of us knew of instances in which instructors had been teaching a course in the program without even knowing that the course was listed as a general education course.

2) We wanted to address a lack of specificity in the old program. The old program was represented as a list of requirements and a long list of classes, divided by large disciplinary categories, which fulfilled those requirements. Though the program had named six learning goals, one often had to search out those goals because they were not necessarily attached to the list of classes. In addition, it was not always clear what those goals even meant; faculty and students seemed to have very different perceptions of them. Nor was it clear how we would demonstrate students’ achievements in those areas. Without a shared sense of what we wanted students to learn or what they were actually learning as they moved through the program, how could the campus, we wondered, fully articulate to students the value of general education?

3) We also wanted to address the concern that UND students were not doing as well as they should in some areas that the faculty as a whole tends to consider to be very important: writing, speaking, and a complex engagement with the issues surrounding diversity. In addition, our reading about national initiatives in general education told us again and again that larger social changes are making new demands on college graduates. As our students enter the workforce and as they take up their civic lives as citizens of a democracy,

they need, in the age of information, to be able to question the information and the arguments, in both written and numerical forms, with which they are constantly confronted. In a time of increasing diversity, students need to be able to understand and respect the ways that our cultural positions shape our differing perspectives.

At base, the new program still retains a commitment to a breadth of knowledge through the requirement that students take 9 credit hours in four broad disciplinary categories: Communication, Fine Arts and Humanities, Social Science, and Math, Science, and Technology. However, layered on this base are several new elements, and all of these elements are meant to address the three concerns listed above. Here are the major changes and a brief discussion of why the task force decided to make them:

The program has a **new name**: Essential Studies.

A name change, we thought, would bring new awareness to the general education program, and this name, we hoped, would take us away from the sense that general education is “general,” or non-specific. The Task Force would like very much for this name change to lead to increased campus conversations about why a liberal education is “essential.”

Essential Studies identifies four **student learning goals**: 1) Thinking and Reasoning: using Critical Thinking, Quantitative Reasoning, and Creative Thinking 2) Communication 3) Information Literacy 4) Social-Cultural Diversity.

The idea here was to focus on fewer goals in order to give ES a greater coherence. The goals themselves have been articulated in more specific language that we hoped would be more accessible—and thus more meaningful—to both faculty and students. All of these interdisciplinary goals are intended to represent “portable” ways of thinking: they are, in other words, intellectual paradigms that students can take from classroom to classroom and skills that students can continue to develop as they move from discipline to discipline. These are ways of thinking that we intend for students to take with them out of the classroom where they can continue to inform and enrich students’ private, civic, and professional lives.

Courses that are validated as part of the ES program will identify one of the four goals on which the course

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will focus, and the idea here is that learning in the program will be more intentional if instructors in all ES courses more carefully articulate to students the main goal on which they are working. If instructors point out to students when and how the course is addressing that goal, we believe that students will see more coherence in the program and will be better able to make connections between the courses that they are taking, even when those courses are in different disciplines. Students should thus have a better understanding of general education and, perhaps even more importantly, a greater stake in their own learning.

Students in Essential Studies will take four **Special Emphasis** courses: Advanced Communication (A), Global Diversity (G), United States Diversity (U), and Quantitative Reasoning (Q).

These courses may be offered across the broad disciplinary categories as well as in the major. With these courses the Task Force wanted to help students get increased practice working in areas that the faculty thinks are of particular significance and areas in which social demands have increased. The special emphasis courses (especially the Advanced Communication course) also encourage the idea that students should work on the goals of general education beyond the introductory level and throughout their years at the University.

Groups of faculty members have recently met to develop criteria for these special emphasis courses (these criteria are now available at www.und.edu/dept/oid/getf.htm), and all have agreed that courses that seek validation as special emphasis courses need to take a particularly focused and concentrated approach to improving student learning in these areas. In addition, special emphasis courses provide an important opportunity for intentional learning—an opportunity for instructors and students to articulate how the course meets the larger goals of liberal learning.

Students in the new program will take an Essential Studies **Capstone** in their senior year.

This Capstone may be offered by the major but some departments will develop ES Capstones for non-majors as well. ES Capstones will address disciplinary or interdisciplinary topics while also focusing on at least two of the ES goals. There were several reasons for instituting the Capstone: 1) The Task Force learned, from literature on the best practices in general education, the importance of giving students the opportunity to practice the goals of the program throughout their university careers—not just in the first two years. Placed at the end of the University experience, the ES Capstone should help students pull together the ways of thinking that they have practiced throughout their ES coursework with what they have learned in the major. 2) The Capstone would offer a place in the curriculum—

a place that simply does not exist in the current program—from which students can be encouraged to reflect on the larger value of their educations. 3) A Senior-level ES Capstone, especially one with an interdisciplinary component, has the potential to broaden the view of students and encourage connections beyond the major.

While working on the transition to Essential Studies this year, I have heard many comments about the new plan. Some are excited to learn about ES and are encouraged to think that it might improve student learning. Others have expressed concerns: some have said that it will be too much work to implement while others have said that perhaps it does not go far enough in the demands that it makes of our students. That I have received both of these responses indicates to me that the Task Force was in fact able to find the middle ground that we sought: we were very aware that too many changes might make the new program seem overwhelming—especially to a major that has little flexibility in its curriculum. And, of course, a new program that was perceived as too demanding would run counter to our desire to create more engagement with general education. At the same time, however, we also knew that the new program needed to be a significant departure from the old one; the new program needed to provide an opportunity for the whole campus to revisit general education.

Those of us who have been working on the new program ask the campus to do what it can to get behind Essential Studies. While we know that it is inevitable there will be some disagreement about some of the features of the new program and while we know that large-scale change leads to increased work for all of us, we also know that a focus on the disagreements and the difficulties will ultimately prevent us from realizing the potential of the new program. Only with the support of the campus can the new program help us achieve what we all want: an improved education for UND students.

The Task Force understood its work as an opportunity to dramatically and to directly improve our students' experiences in general education on this campus. We have also been highly aware that these changes will make very little difference if the campus does not embrace them. Understanding the change as simply replacing one set of requirements with another set of boxes to check will not address what was wrong with our general education program. Instead, we all need to name the new learning goals, speak eloquently about their value, and help students see how the work they do in our courses addresses those goals. Faculty members, advisors, and the whole campus need to find new ways of talking to students about Essential Studies and about our belief in a liberal arts foundation.

FIDC Announces Deadline for Travel and Instructional Materials Applications

Noon on May 1 is the deadline for submission of travel applications to the FIDC for travel which will occur between May 2 and August 31, 2008. This is also the final deadline for submission of proposals to purchase instructional materials, software, minor equipment and other non-salary expenses directly related to teaching. **Please note:** because these awards are funded with appropriated operating dollars it is imperative that the invoicing and the delivery of goods/services occur on or before June 30, 2008 in order for funding to be utilized. Applications may be submitted in person or mailed to Stop 7104. Further information regarding guidelines is provided on the OID website.

A Call for Innovative & Best Practices in Teaching & Learning at UND

One of the greatest benefits of being involved in OID activities is getting to hear about all of the good teaching that goes on in our classrooms at UND. It is genuinely inspiring to know how many of us care deeply about students' learning and invest tremendous time and effort to inspire and enhance it. OID and the Faculty Instructional Development Committee (FIDC) would like to recognize some of that good work. We are asking you to let us know about the successful, effective and/or innovative teaching and learning strategies that you have developed for our students. We will compile these inspiring models and share them on campus. We also hope that over time this collection might grow into something larger for an audience external to UND. So let us know about a classroom strategy you have developed that engages students, gets them excited about their learning, and helps them successfully accomplish your learning goals.

Full application guidelines are posted to the OID webpage at <http://www.und.edu/dept/oid/index.htm>.

Proposals are due April 30, 2008. Faculty whose proposals are accepted will receive \$750 and will be asked to prepare materials and take part in future conversations around their work. As with all FIDC funding, eligible faculty include those teaching full- or part-time; tenure-track or non-tenure track; adjunct or professorial faculty.

Curriculum Development Retreat Funding Available

The Office of Instructional Development is making grants available to academic programs and departments conducting curriculum development retreats. The most useful and productive program development occurs when there's a mechanism for collective conversation around student learning goals, pedagogy and curriculum design. These retreats are intended to serve that purpose by providing opportunities to bring faculty together to analyze, discuss, and develop curriculum across their program or department. So, if you have a grad program in need of attention or are trying to figure out the implications of the new ES program for your department and your majors, this funding can help advance those necessary conversations.

An academic department or program may request a maximum of \$500. Funding will be available on a first-come, first-served basis for qualifying departments until the available funds are exhausted. Funds awarded may be used for food (consistent with university guidelines), duplicating, and/or faculty stipends for pre-retreat organization, retreat facilitation, or data analysis. The funding will expire June 30, 2008.

To apply for retreat funding, please submit a 1-2 page memo that includes a proposed retreat agenda and budget, as well as a narrative description of both. Also include a letter of support from the chair (unless the chair is submitting the proposal). Inquiries and applications should be directed to Anne Kelsch at anne_kelsch@und.nodak.edu. You may also be aware of funding available through the Provost's office for assessment retreats (see next item). If you are working on both curriculum development and assessment activities please consider applying for both: the same application can be submitted to both offices and both offices should be informed of the dual application.

"Closing the Assessment Loop" Funding Available for Assessment Retreats

"Closing the Assessment Loop" funding will again be made available to academic departments conducting assessment retreats. The best and most useful assessment occurs when there's a mechanism for yearly conversations about data collected. These retreats are intended to serve that purpose by providing opportunities to bring faculty together to review, discuss, and use findings from assessment efforts.

Funds have been set aside by the VPAA/Provost's Office (out of funds expiring as of June 30, 2008) to support departmental retreats; a department may request a maximum of \$500. Funding will be available on a first-come, first-served basis for qualifying departments until the available funds are exhausted. However, if requested funding exceeds the dollars available, preference may be given to departments which did not receive retreat grants in 2007. Funds awarded may be used for food (consistent with university guidelines), duplicating, and/or faculty stipends for pre-retreat organization, retreat facilitation, or data analysis.

To apply for retreat funding: Please submit a 1-2 page memo that includes a proposed retreat agenda and budget, as well as a narrative description of both. Also include a letter of support from the chair (unless the chair is submitting the proposal). Inquiries or applications should be directed to Joan Hawthorne (joan_hawthorne@und.nodak.edu) or 777-4684. Proposals will be acted on within two weeks of receipt as long as funding remains available.

Proposals for November Collaboration Conference due April 18, 2008

The conference is titled "Culture Matters: Designing Learning Environments to Foster Cultural Awareness and Intercultural Competence." Conference dates are November 21-22, 2008. The Call for Proposals can be found online at www.collab.org.

ON TEACHING
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Upcoming Deadlines and Events

Friday, April 18		Collaboration Conference proposals due See page 5 for details
Tuesday, April 22	NOON	ES Model Projects Grant Submissions (must be made electronically) due See page 2 for details
Thursday, April 24 Swanson Hall 10-12	12:30-1:30	<i>Sharing Opinions in Class: Encouraging Dialogue, not Diatribe</i> To reserve a box lunch, call Jana Hollands at 777-4998 by noon on Tue. Apr 22
Wednesday, April 30		Innovative & Best Practices in Teaching & Learning proposals due See page 5 for details
Thursday, May 1	NOON	FIDC grant applications and Mini-Project proposals due These may be dropped off in person at the OID office, Twamley Hall Room 409, or mailed to Stop 7104