

**Quality Enhancement Proposal  
Whitepaper**

**Thematic Year Program:  
Creating a Campus Learning Community**

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## Description of the Problem and Rationale

... research universities have too often failed, and continue to fail, their undergraduate populations. Tuition income from undergraduates is one of the major sources of university income, helping to support research programs and graduate education, but the students paying the tuition get, in all too many cases, less than their money's worth.

Boyer Commission, *Reinventing Undergraduate Education*

As the 1998 Boyer Commission report identified, research intensive universities face a critical need to improve undergraduate education. This critical need has only grown worse over the last decade as the overall share of state support continues to decrease for public universities like UK. The increased reliance on revenues from undergraduate tuition and from federal and private grants for advanced research, increases the divide between those units responsible for teaching undergraduates, primarily the humanities, and those who generate research revenue, particularly in the sciences and medical professions.

Beginning in 1999, the University of Kentucky has addressed the core concerns of undergraduate education by calling for and instituting several individual, stand-alone programs directed at undergraduates.<sup>1</sup> These include freshman seminars, living/learning communities, academic resource centers, recognition of outstanding teaching faculty, and linking students directly to faculty research. UK's most holistic response to the crisis in undergraduate education has been the reform of its general education curriculum. The proposed curriculum currently under review by the Faculty Senate is based in large measure on the 2006 whitepaper "University of Kentucky Liberal Education for All Professions: UK-LEAP." This document outlined a basic structure for general education,

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<sup>1</sup> Louis Swift, et al., "President's Initiative on Undergraduate Education in Kentucky's Comprehensive Research University: A Report," <http://www.uky.edu/UGS/Init/Final399.html>

based in large measure on the LEAP Project promulgated by the AAC&U. A significant and crucial difference between the pending general education curriculum and the UK-LEAP vision is the absence of any emphasis on the category “Integration and Application.” This category was crucial component of the AAC&U Learning Outcomes:

The undergraduate experience can be a fragmented landscape of general education courses, preparation for the major, co-curricular activities, and “the real world” beyond the campus. But an emphasis on integrative learning can help undergraduates put the pieces together and develop habits of mind that prepare them to make informed judgments in the conduct of personal, professional, and civic life. [http://www.aacu.org/integrative\\_learning/pdfs/ILP\\_Statement.pdf](http://www.aacu.org/integrative_learning/pdfs/ILP_Statement.pdf)

The absence of the integrative component is a potential weakness in the new general education. Without some mechanism to pull the curriculum together, it risks devolving into a series of disconnected courses, a fragmentation that is widely recognized as a primary fault of the previous USP curriculum.<sup>2</sup> If so, the progress that UK has made towards improving the quality of undergraduate education would fail to address the basic, structural problem of undergraduate education in research universities, what the Boyer Report characterized as its division into “archipelagos of intellectual pursuit.” The University would fall well short of its own ideal, which envisions “a full integration of scholarship and application” that is the hallmark of the “practical scholar.”<sup>3</sup>

### **Campus as a Classroom: Thematic Year Program (TYP)**

To meet this critical need, we propose that the campus adopts as its QEP an program that will address issues of integration of learning, sequential progression, high-impact practices, and practical skills: a university-wide thematic year tied directly to the general education curriculum. Designed primarily to address Goal I of UK’s Strategic

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<sup>2</sup> Most notably the USP “Self-Study Report” (October 2004) and the “Final Report of the USP External Review Committee” (May 2006). Both reports can be found at [http://www.uky.edu/GenEd/Hist\\_docs.html](http://www.uky.edu/GenEd/Hist_docs.html)

<sup>3</sup> “President’s Initiative on Undergraduate Education,” unpaginated.

Plan (“Prepare Students for Leading Roles in an Innovation-driven Economy and Global Society), the TYP will nonetheless encompass the other four goals, particularly Goal 2 (Promote Research) and Goal 5 (Improve the Quality of Life of Kentuckians through Engagement, Outreach, and Service).

The TYP is based, as noted above, on the AAC&U Integrative model, which provides a mechanism to pull the various, innovative strands related to essential skills, inquiry-based learning, global and civic responsibility together within the undergraduate experience.<sup>4</sup> Two common approaches to this AAC&U Integrative model include the development of a linked series of common or “core” classes or capstones courses. The basic delivery module here is the individual class (which can be within a major, or as an interdisciplinary requirement within general education) which relies on a teacher who defines, organizes and presents “a unified or integrated conception of some form of knowledge to the student” (hence this approach is usually identified under the term “integrated studies; Mathison and Freeman, 1997, p.9). The problem with these integrated courses is that they are dependent on small class sizes, tied to the interests and knowledge of individual instructors, and tend to divide students by majors. When translated to the campus of a large research university, they tend to duplicate the atomistic and fragmented quality of the university as a whole, and are often relegated to programs aimed at high-achieving students in elite academic programs like Honors.

A more appropriate model for UK is an integrative, rather than integrated, one. According to Mathison and Freeman (1997), an integrative approach “starts with

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<sup>4</sup> “Integrative learning is an understanding and a disposition that a student builds across the curriculum and co-curriculum, from making simple connections among ideas and experiences to synthesizing and transferring learning to new, complex situations within and beyond the campus.” AAC&U Integrative Learning VALUE Rubric. <http://www.aacu.org/value/rubrics/pdf/integrativelearning.pdf>

students' and teachers' concerns and ideas, transcends the disciplines in a search for coherence and meaning, and is built through daily negotiations and interactions." The goal of the TYP would be to focus the campus each year on a common set of "big" issues that have local, national, and global implications. The organizing focus must be ambitious and relevant, global and abstract, made up of themes capable not only of provoking discussions in classrooms but debates on the campus sidewalks regarding weighty concepts, profound ideas. Examples might be Sustainability, Energy, Water, Identity; an alternative approach would be to create larger, more encompassing categories such as Science, Culture, and Society; Space and Place; Creativity, Representation, Reality (note: these are presented as examples only and are not prescriptive). Through a mechanism defined below, the campus would identify a recurring series of themes that can be repeated at regular intervals (say every four years) so that organizers could benefit from lessons learned in earlier iterations and to provide a baseline for assessment. Specific programming would be driven by the proposals that were presented by the faculty, staff, and students. The themes should link to community involvement, citizenship, ethics, and scientific literacy. In this way, the issues explored would support the requirements of the General Education, linking particularly to its Inquiry and Citizenship components.

The TYP concept provides the opportunity to highlight the activities and accomplishments of the many faculty spread across the units at UK who conduct world-class, cutting-edge research. The TYP should also advantage of the unique research-related networks that that UK faculty have with scholars with similar expertise. In this way the TYP has the potential for linking faculty expertise directly to general education

as students and faculty articulate co-curricular and community experiences (lectures, presentations, debates, exhibitions, and performances) with the inquiry-based skills, literacies, and global perspectives developed in the academic program (both general education and disciplinary majors).

As important as faculty will be in this program, in an integrative approach “the ‘integration’ is done by the person him or herself; it is not done for that person by others” (Beane, 1992, p. 49). An integrative approach requires faculty and students to partner in the formation of the how and the what of the learning experience. Though faculty lead, in the sense that they possess a certain expertise and knowledge, students must also actively engage in the process. The theme and its programmatic support must seem relevant; it will resonate with students only if the activities include options that open the discussion to personal interests by stressing the cultural and social importance of ideas, concepts, skills, and actions that may spring from learning. In this integrative approach, faculty would be challenged to present advanced research in ways that could be understood by undergraduates (and hence the general public which supplies funding); in turn, the undergraduates would be challenged to stretch the learning outcomes developed in general education and their own majors to encompass this research. Extended to a campus-wide scale, goals for students would include affective learning, practical application of information literacy for critical thinking and decision-making, the development of collaborative skills, and citizenship. If instituted, the integrative partnership that forms the TYP significantly broadens the participation of undergraduates in the research of UK beyond existing programs like eUreKA. It promotes the model of “student as scholar” by providing many more undergraduates the opportunity to confront,

evaluate, and analyze data and arguments that link cutting-edge research to real problems impacting decisions of everyday life.

Perhaps the most critical element of this plan is its potential to impact the campus for a modest expenditure of new resources. It does so by leveraging already existing investments in research and creativity. Each year UK produces an uncounted variety of individual lectures, presentations, exhibitions, performances, service and other experiential projects. TYP has the potential to join many of these into explorations in which the sum is far greater than the individual parts. For this reason, the nature of the themes chosen should be broad enough to appeal to a wide constituency, providing the intellectual space for the different academic units to expand on or focus in on a particular aspect of the theme appropriate to its academic mission and the research and teaching interests of its faculty. In this way, the TYP can be seen to support Objective 1.3 of Goal 1 of the UK Strategic plan which calls for the University to extend opportunities for high-impact learning and to develop cohesion between curricular and co-curricular offerings.

Campus-wide themes or thematic years are often found in liberal arts colleges and university campuses with smaller undergraduate populations as a means of promoting campus identity. Such structures are less frequently found in institutions like UK, though in 2005 the University of Iowa sponsored a campus-wide initiative focusing on the arts and humanities, while Stanford University has an ongoing, campus-wide programming initiative “designed to infuse the processes and values of artistic inquiry and creative discovery into the fabric of campus life and learning.” The thematic year program proposed here would be unique, as far as I can tell, because of its connection to general education, its campus-wide reach, and presence at a research intensive university.

A prototype for this concept already exists on the UK campus. The Common Reading Experience focuses on freshmen students and seeks to use the selection, discussion and exploration of a shared book as a way of welcoming and integrating first year students into campus life. The success of this program demonstrates the potential for the Thematic Year. As envisaged, the thematic year program will develop a similar faculty/staff/student-driven committee infrastructure. The Thematic Year concept has the potential to link General Education and faculty research directly to other, ongoing campus initiatives such as Discovery Seminars, Living/Learning Communities, Service Learning, Honors, Chellgren Center, Gaines Center, and the new International Certificate program. Moreover, campus themes may also be a way to bring units not traditionally associated with general education, such as Engineering, Law, Public Health, Business and Economics (or undergraduate education in any sense, such as UKHealthcare) into the fold as issues related to the mission of each are integrated into the theme. Because of this, the Thematic Year concept has the potential to address several, if not all, of the QEP themes including Developing Engaged Citizenship, Global Awareness and Involvement, Fostering a Supportive and Vibrant Campus Culture, and Enhancing Scholarship.

### **Personnel, Activities, and Timeline**

A central committee, tentatively called the General Education Thematic Year Program Committee, housed under the aegis of the Associate Provost for Undergraduate Education, will coordinate the programming the various units, and plan high-profile university-wide events to focus the campus. The GETYP Committee will consist of two main subcommittees, one focused on the selection of proposals from faculty and staff, the other on the implementation. The Selection Committee's main charge is to select themes



and organize a process through which faculty, students, and staff may apply participate in the thematic year. The Implementation Subcommittee is composed of those directly responsible for organizing and conducting thematic year activities. Appendix I contains a more thorough explanation of the composition of this committee.

### **Learning Outcomes and Assessment**

The TYP Selection Committee, in collaboration for whatever body is charge oversight of general education, should be charge with developing both the Learning Outcomes and Assessment model for the program. Learning Outcomes for the TYP should be tied directly to those developed for general education. A model for this is the Learning Outcomes developed by AAC&U LEAP (see appendix I). Using this as an initial guide, the TYP committee should identify specific, measurable, learning outcomes relevant to the chosen theme. These program level objectives should be tied to the broader goals of the general education program, but are intended to reflect the unique character of each year's theme. Direct and indirect assessment data will be collected using the procedures established for the new general education program assessment (documentation of governance process, documentation of curricular development, and collection of teaching and learning artifacts).

Though based on AAC&U rubrics, assessment must also be local: “locally developed assignments and assessments is the enhanced likelihood that teaching and instruction will be aligned intentionally to produce quality learning and that the assessments will have good validity” (Huber et al, 2007; Leskes and Wright, 2005). Furthermore, because the intention of this proposal is to create an integrative learning experience for undergraduates at the University of Kentucky, assessment tools developed

as part of the National Project on Assessing Learning in Learning Communities will be implemented. If the Thematic Year Project is intended to create a new academic culture on campus, then we assert that we are in fact creating a campus wide learning community. This is ambitious and requires that we create sustainable ways to document and track ways in which the TYP succeeds in nurturing integrated learning opportunities. Again, this will be assessed through documentation of the governance process, documentation of curricular development, and the collection of teaching and learning artifacts. In addition, documentation of outreach and engagement will be included as the Thematic Year programming reaches out into the commonwealth and invites new partners and intellectual relationships to our campus. See Appendix II for a more detailed discussion.

### **Budget**

A full-time staff person would be needed to coordinate the activities of the committees, help process budget allocations and transfers, and to create and maintain a central calendar of events. The Committee should be appropriated a budget of approximately \$100,000 for each year for programming. This is sufficient money to begin to plan the thematic year given that also recommend that the Committee allocate this money with a priority to proposals that are matched on a 1:1 matching basis with funds from Colleges, Departments, and units or other external sources. This matching money could come from income from endowments created for visiting scholars and/or income from performances, shows, and events. In effect, each team organizing a thematic year could have approximately \$200,000 for programmatic activities. Finally, due to the significant amount of service required it is recommended that faculty and staff

participating on these committees, especially those involved in implementation be granted release time from other departmental expectations.

Five-Year Budget Breakdown

Year 1: Initial Selection

Full Time Staff	\$ 52,654
(recommended: Professional staff, MT 0041, annual salary \$40,000)	
<u>Stipends/Faculty Release time</u>	<u>\$30,000</u>
Year 2 Total	\$82,654

Year 2-5: Implementation and Selection

Program Expenses (Lecture Fees, etc.)	\$100,000
Full Time Staff	: \$ 52,654
Marketing/Advertising/Operating	\$ 7,000
<u>Stipends/Faculty Release time</u>	<u>\$30,000</u>
Each Year Total	\$189,654

Total 5 Year Budget: \$ 841,270

Potential Funding Sources:

There are many and varied sources for external, internal, and matching funds for the activities of any given thematic year. These include:

- The office of the University of Kentucky Vice-President for Research (i.e. Conference and Workshop Grants, Undergraduate Research Program)
- Matching funds from Student Government, UK Colleges and academic units, UKAM, Singletary Center.
- There are opportunities to approach private funding Agencies such as the Lucille Little Foundation, Keeneland, the Association of Performing Arts Presenters (Creative Campus Innovations Grant), Mellon Foundation
- Public and State Funding: LexArts, partnerships with various community organizations, National Endowment for the Humanities
- The TY programming presents several opportunities for external fundraising from private individuals in the form of named lectures, grants, and/or naming the entire program.

**Conclusion: The Hub of Campus Learning**

The TYP will extend the bounds of learning, using the vast amount of research expertise and creative programming already available as raw material for debate and

discussion campus-wide. Individual faculty will be encouraged to integrate this programming into their general education courses either as curricular projects or co-curricular activities to broaden and deepen student appreciation for these thematic foci as part of their general education experience. Linking together expectations in specific classes to more encompassing discussions across campus has the potential to generate a common purpose and excitement for the many co-curricular events associated with the Thematic Year. One of the most important aspects of the Thematic Year, then, will be its potential to enhance campus life and to encourage students to stay on campus instead of going home on weekends. It has the potential to increase the visibility of the University in the surrounding area by bringing exciting topics and themes to the attention of the local and regional community. Citizens of the Commonwealth should be invited and encouraged to attend lectures, discussions, and forums. Thus the TYP concept offers an unparalleled opportunity to promote the University, its faculty, students and staff, and our mutual commitment to learning.

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## **Appendix 1: The Thematic Year Committee and Subcommittees**

As described above, the TYP will be the responsibility of the Thematic Year Committee. It is suggested that this committee be composed of two parts, the Selection Subcommittee and the Implementation Subcommittee. This appendix offers suggestions for the structure, function and membership of these organizations.

The Selection Subcommittee should have broad representation drawn from designees of the Associate Provost for Undergraduate Education, the Dean of Students, student government, staff, and faculty from several Colleges. It must be stressed that student perspectives must play a role in the selection and implementation of the theme for any particular year. This is not to say that the thematic year is student-driven, as much as it would be informed by student input. Leadership is also crucial. Following the example of the University of Iowa, it is suggested that the Selection committee be chaired or co-chaired by faculty with significant campus-wide profile, for example, a president-emeritus. This Subcommittee should have the authority to develop and monitor policies and procedures for affecting the general organization, oversight, and assessment of the Thematic Year. These policies must be widely and regularly disseminated to the campus. The Committees primary activities should revolve around reviewing and ranking proposals. It should recommend one or more finalist to the Associate Provost for Undergraduate Education who will have final approval of the winning proposal. This decision to award the responsibility for the conduct thematic year should be made with sufficient lead-time (at least eighteen months) for planning and preparation can begin.

The Implementation Subcommittee should consist of at least six to nine members who will serve staggered, three year terms. These should be the faculty and staff who have been awarded the responsibility for the conduct of the thematic year for the current academic year, for the previous academic year, and for the upcoming academic year. (It is expected that at least two members, each from a different academic unit, will lead the program for each year, hence the minimum membership of six.) It should be required that proposals be the result of the collaboration of at least two faculty members and that these organizers represent at least two different academic units. It is the responsibility of this subcommittee to organize major or “keynote” campus events and to coordinate the web of activities related to the theme that are produced by other individuals and units in the university.

The subcommittee members chosen to organize a thematic year will be given great leeway for establishing a crucial current in the wider stream of the University’s academic progress; with this privilege comes great responsibility. Faculty who participate will be, in effect, pledging three years of service to the Committee. Their first year will be devoted to planning, organizing, and scheduling. Their second year of service will be the actual running the Thematic Year. The third year of service will be spent assisting and advising the faculty undertaking subsequent programs. They will also be charged with gathering as wide of a range of viewpoints and support as possible as they solicit matching money for Colleges and other units for their events and as they participate in public discussions concerning applications for future years.

## **Appendix 2: Assessment Definitions and Procedures**

**Documentation of Governance:** Following the procedures established through the recent general education reform process of posting information on a public website, the work of the TYP committee will be documented through the collection of meeting minutes, reports, and communications. In addition, the TYP committee will be responsible for establishing clear program evaluation guidelines for each TYP cycle including but not limited to the collection of participation data and feedback for continuous improvement.

**Documentation of Curricular Development:** To capture the extent to which the TYP is imbedded in the curriculum two annual surveys will be administered by the Office for Institutional Assessment in collaboration with the TYP committee and the Office for Undergraduate Education.

- **Survey of College Administration:** this survey will be sent to all associate deans, department chairs, and center directors to ask for examples of ways they have seen the TYP integrated in their college and units.
- **Survey of College Faculty:** this survey will be sent to all faculty to ask for examples of ways they have integrated the TYP into their teaching or ways that they have shared their research interests as part of TYP programming.

Results of this documentation will include evidence of integration of the thematic year program into first year courses including but not limited to discovery seminars, honors courses, and living learning linked courses, evidence of integration of the thematic year program into general education courses, and examples of integration of the thematic year program into college and faculty scholarly activities.

**Assessment of TYP Learning Objectives**

- Direct assessment of thematic year learning outcomes through identification of student artifacts from the above courses directly linked to the thematic year program.
- Indirect assessment of thematic year learning outcomes through institutional assessment instruments such as NSSE and CLA
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**Assessment of Engagement and Outreach:** Current procedures for measuring University engagement activities will be adapted to capture information regarding TYP impact.