

Background

The university community is at a crossroads in a long process that has included multiple efforts by faculty and administrators to examine our undergraduate curriculum and imagine its possibilities. Established in 1988 and subsequently amended in 2002, the University Studies Program (USP) has served as the general education curriculum for all undergraduates at UK. Over the past two years, USP has undergone self study and is currently in the process of external review and campus discussion.

At the University Senate meeting this November, Professor Alan DeSantis presented the External Review Committee's preliminary report including a set of guiding principles for undergraduate education that are the focus of the conversations proposed here (see Attachment A). In addition, the Provost and the Senate Council announced the establishment of a General Education Reform and Assessment (GERA) Planning and Coordinating Committee for the purpose of facilitating dialogue and moving the process of review and potential reform forward over the next six months (see Attachment B). This committee has recently conducted a survey of faculty in undergraduate colleges and developed a web site for the purpose of sharing information. Analysis of the survey reveals that our faculty views the current program as reflecting a distribution structure in which goals are expressed primarily as a list of courses. Respondents conclude that students likely experience USP as fragmented and disconnected, leaving them to search for commonalities and to make connections on their own between principles of undergraduate education and the disciplinary content of their major.

GERA Goal & Objectives

The goal of the current campus wide discussion, therefore, is to consider the External Review Committee's recommendations and identify ways in which a new general education curriculum might take shape.

Practically speaking, this conversation is about *the scope and objectives of our undergraduate curriculum not about specifics of implementation*. There will need to be further discussions of resources and administrative logistics, but these are not our current task. Rather our objective is to create, through open dialogue and debate, a general education program that is responsive to both student and university aspirations, more innovative and efficient than the current program, and considerate of the practical and educational needs of the colleges.

Key Questions to Consider

- Given the External Review Committee's set of principles as a starting point (see attached), what are the pros and cons of such a conceptual framework? What is missing? Do we ask too much of general education? Too little?
- Holding aside, for the moment, the general problems of implementation, how might this conceptual framework of learning objectives be reconciled with the notion of measurable competencies or skill sets? How can the framework of the liberal arts be constructed so the general education program generally and student development in particular can be routinely assessed?
- Again bracketing the technicalities of implementation, consider what, in an era of globalization and increasing technical specialization, should be the relative balance of liberal education and vocational knowledge in a university studies program for a research university like UK?

Next Steps

College Forums

The undergraduate core curriculum does not stand alone; it must be articulated carefully with the ambitions of the major programs within the colleges. In January and February of 2006 a series of forums will be held in each of the eleven undergraduate colleges. In these forums **all** faculty and instructional staff will be asked to consider goals for undergraduate education relative to the recommendations provided by the External Review committee and the particular needs identified by each college.

Purposefully, each degree program should examine its current curricular requirements and consider questions like: “What knowledge do we want our graduates to have?” What, in an era of globalization and increasing technical specialization, should be the relative balance of liberal education and professional knowledge in our degree programs?

College faculty will be asked to consider carefully at what stage of their undergraduate experience (general education, college-wide courses, major courses, etc.) they believe students should attain certain knowledge and, perhaps more importantly, in what ways the spirit of a general education program might be integrated holistically into the degree programs. Specifically, what are the differences between prerequisites for success in each college and general objectives for UK undergraduate education as understood by the faculty?

Campus and Community Forums

The undergraduate curriculum also does not stand in isolation to graduate education, the surrounding community, and the students themselves. Forums will be held in February and March for interested members of the professional colleges, campus organizations, and the surrounding community. Students and alumni are especially encouraged to participate in these discussions.

Feedback and Reflection

It is the goal of the Joint Provost/Senate Council committee that these discussions be open, thought-provoking, dynamic, and timely. Review materials of previous committee reports, links to internal and external information sources about undergraduate education, and summaries of discussions from the forums will be posted regularly at www.uky.edu/GERA. Again, the purpose of the GERA Planning and Coordinating Committee is to facilitate open discussion and move the review process forward.

Implementation Calendar

Upon receipt of the feedback provided by the above forums facilitated by GERA, the External Review Committee will prepare a final draft of their recommendations including a preliminary framework for implementation to be reviewed by the University Senate in April, 2006. With Senate approval of the new framework, the reform effort will turn to the next phase involving issues of **curriculum development, implementation, and funding** beginning in the summer of 2006, broadly speaking, under Senate auspices. Final approval of the revised general education program is expected of the University Senate in the Spring of 2007.

Attachment A: External Review Committee Preliminary Report

**University of Kentucky
University Studies Program
External Review**

Submitted by the University External Review Committee

Alan D. DeSantis (Chair)
Communication

Tony Hardin
Theatre

Jeff Osborn
Biology

Jane Peters
Art

Bill Rayens
Statistics

Jane Wells
Accounting

October 2005

In early February of 2004, the External Review Committee met with Michael Nietzel, then Provost of the University of Kentucky; Philip Kraemer, Associate Provost for Undergraduate Education; Connie Ray, Vice President for Institutional Research, Planning & Effectiveness; and Ernie Yanarella, Faculty Senate Chair to address the group's questions and to detail its goals. It was decided that the committee's initial charge would be six fold:

- Explore solutions to the weaknesses highlighted by the University's Self-Study Report.
- Facilitate campus-wide discussions on USP reform.
- Investigate our benchmarks' best undergraduate practices.
- Generate "bold and creative" alternatives to our present USP practices.
- Remain cognizant of the institution's increasing enrollment and its decreasing budget.
- Develop a final report that is as complete and detailed as time and resources allow.

With the departure of Michael Nietzel and the creation of the Center for Undergraduate Excellence, however, the committee's charge was changed to accommodate the institution's new administrative and structural developments. In late July of 2005, the committee's modified assignment was to generate a series of guidelines and/or ideas, in an attenuated document, that would serve as an intellectual springboard for a newly formed Implementation Task Force.

With this new call, the committee saw an ideal opportunity to take the first, and perhaps, most important step in significant reform by articulating what they believe the University's mission and responsibilities are to *all* undergraduates.

Towards this end, the committee generated five core-learning outcomes that are essential in producing 1) an enlightened student body capable of responsibly participating in their diverse and democratic culture, and 2) a progressive and forward thinking university that will become our benchmarks' standard of excellence.

General Education Reform and Assessment (GERA) Overview

The committee strongly recommends that these five core-learning outcomes serve as the guiding principles in restructuring the University of Kentucky's undergraduate mission. It is the belief of this group that simply adding new courses or subtracting old ones, without a firm commitment to such a foundation, will only produce an increasingly disconnected, fragmented, and unsatisfying undergraduate experience for both students and professors.

This idea of having the general studies curriculum grow from a collection of focused guiding principles is not a new idea in the larger community of universities. Miami University of Ohio, for example, developed their innovative and successful "Miami Plan" in exactly this way. The specific guiding principles for Miami University, however, are not necessarily the right ones for a public, rank-one research institution like ours. As the state's flagship institution, we must understand the particular talents of our faculty and the needs of the Commonwealth we serve, and then weave these into both a colorful and profound expression of undergraduate education for all of our students.

In the section that follows, we will briefly discuss each of our five core learning outcomes and supply some examples of courses and/or programs that have been piloted or adopted on campus to help clarify the intent of these goals. The committee underscores the importance of realizing that these examples are not intended to be exhaustive or simple panaceas to our current problems. Instead they are meant only to frame the larger discussion and point to possible areas for future investigation. Finally, when applicable, the committee will recommend courses and/or programs that have been used at our benchmark institutions that have shown tentative promise in fulfilling our learning outcomes. While the committee did not have sufficient time or resources to seriously investigate the logistics of these ideas, we are optimistic about their potential and strongly encourage the Implementation Task Force to explore their feasibility in more detail.

I. The new core curriculum program should better enable all students to understand their place and purpose in their ever-changing world.

Often students who enter our University's front doors have not had the intellectual freedom or the needed stimulation to understand the complexity of their own society, let alone that of others around the world. A core curriculum, therefore, must empower students to not only uncover the complexity of their own lives but to be curious and knowledgeable about the multicultural world

General Education Reform and Assessment (GERA) Overview

outside of our Commonwealth's borders. We must also ensure that our students are prepared, intellectually and ethically, to develop their own informed worldview. Once equipped, they can answer the pressing questions of "who are they," "what are their rights and responsibilities as citizens of their community, state, nation, and world," and "how can they be both committed to an ethical foundation and sensitive to multicultural differences."

A. Specifically, the committee recommends that a new core-curriculum program enable all students to accomplish the following:

- Understand the histories behind their own culture's social practices.
- Learn about the myriad cultures, religions, languages, and customs in their world.
- Learn from multiple and competing perspectives.
- Develop and apply their own worldview.

B. Some examples of courses or programs at the University that have attempted to address this learning outcome include the following:

- "Ways of Knowing," "Journeys," "Communities," and "Ecology" courses of the Modern Studies Program.
- "Ecology" and "Journeys" courses of the Expanding Horizons Program.
- Global Studies Program.
- The current USP cross-cultural requirement.

C. Suggested programs/courses that should be examined more closely to determine their feasibility and effectiveness:

- The committee recommends that the university earnestly promote and expand its current Study Abroad Program. Every undergraduate student should be strongly encouraged to study for at least one semester outside the borders of the United States, preferably in a non-English speaking country.

II. The new core curriculum program should better enable all students to engage in the process of inquiry and reflection.

General Education Reform and Assessment (GERA) Overview

The often cited Boyer Commission on Educating Undergraduates in the Research University saw the unique opportunities that Research One Universities have to educate their undergraduates:

WHAT IS NEEDED NOW IS A NEW MODEL OF UNDERGRADUATE education at research universities that makes the baccalaureate experience an inseparable part of an integrated whole. . . . There needs to be a symbiotic relationship between all the participants in university learning that will provide a new kind of undergraduate experience available only at research institutions. Moreover, productive research faculties might find new stimulation and new creativity in contact with bright, imaginative, and eager baccalaureate students, and graduate students would benefit from integrating their research and teaching experiences (pp. 7-8).

Inspired by Boyer's ideas, we believe that the University of Kentucky has a unique opportunity to form a symbiotic relationship between our research agendas and our pedagogical commitment to our undergraduate students. While it may be largely the responsibility of our majors to develop this relationship along methodological lines, it is the responsibility of our core curriculum to capture and communicate those facets of inquiry and reflection that motivate and sustain successful research agendas at a Rank One Research Institution. It is in this sense that our core curriculum needs to encourage faculty to bring their research into their classrooms where students can be inspired by their quest for new knowledge, directed by their methodological rigor, and informed by their findings and conclusions. By doing this, we will not only highlight what is special about the undergraduate experience at the University of Kentucky, we will also foster the spirit of curiosity in our students and supply them with the tools and methods they will need to ask and answer the perplexing questions that await them in their post-college lives.

- A. Specifically, the committee recommends that a new core curriculum program enable all students to accomplish the following:
- Generate new knowledge by applying research processes and methods.
 - Create their own "moments of epiphany."
 - Become life-long learners.

General Education Reform and Assessment (GERA) Overview

- B. Some examples of courses or programs at the University that have attempted to address this learning outcome include the following:
- Freshman Discovery Course.
 - Living/Learning Center.
- C. Suggested programs/courses that should be examined more closely to determine their feasibility and effectiveness:
- The committee encourages the university to explore the possibility of a Senior Capstone course that would be major specific and would focus on inquiry-based learning. This would also serve as an idea site for program assessment.
 - The committee encourages the university to explore the possibility of a Senior Discovery Seminar where any student, regardless of discipline or major, could explore inquiry-based learning in any of the three major areas of knowledge, e.g., humanities, social sciences, natural sciences. Ideally, the topics explored in these seminars would encourage civic engagement and be directed at improving the human condition in the commonwealth.
 - Both the Capstone Course and the Senior Seminar might also be effective strategies for bridging the divide that now exists between students' first two academic years (when USP courses are disproportionately taken) and their later years (when major courses are disproportionately taken).

III. The new core curriculum program should better enable all students to think from multidisciplinary perspectives

The organizational structure of most traditional American universities forces both professors and students into isolated and myopic departments. This Balkanization of knowledge stifles transcendent and intellectually expansive thinking: Lines are drawn, territories are guarded, and ideas are protected as the sole domain of one group. This committee believes that for bold and creative reform to take place at the University of Kentucky, knowledge must be liberated from the politics of “departmentalization.”

We must stop thinking about what specific “history,” “psychology,” “art,” and “mathematics” courses we want students to take and begin thinking about what we want our

General Education Reform and Assessment (GERA) Overview

students to learn and how that knowledge can best be transmitted. Quite often, the answer to both of these questions rests on the use of multidisciplinary education strategies where big questions are asked and answered from a plurality of perspectives and epistemologies. In accomplishing such a goal, we will ultimately make knowledge vastly more complex, interdependent, and interesting for both students and teachers.

- A. Specifically, the committee recommends that a new core curriculum program enable all students to accomplish the following:
- Synthesize materials from multiple disciplines.
 - Integrate ideas from various disciplines.
 - Apply theories and methods across multiple disciplines.
- B. Some examples of courses or programs at the University that have attempted to address this learning outcome include the following:
- “Introduction to the Social Sciences” courses from the Social Science Honors Program.
 - “Space, Place, and Culture” option in the new Honors Program.
 - “Ways of Knowing,” “Journeys,” “Communities,” and “Ecology” courses of the Modern Studies Program.
 - “Ecology” and “Journeys” courses of the Expanding Horizons Program.
 - Global Studies Program.
- C. Suggested programs/courses that should be examined more closely to determine their feasibility and effectiveness:
- The committee encourages the university to explore multi-disciplinary ways of teaching the traditional USP curriculum. Many of our broad-topic survey courses, e.g., Introduction to Psychology, Communication, Economics, Art History, could be transformed into classes infinitely more diverse and layered if taught by a well coordinated, multi-disciplinary team of professors. Art historians, literary critics, geographers, family-studies scholars, gender researchers, computer scientists, and neurologists could all lend their unique perspective to the foundational question of what it means to be human in the 21st Century.

IV. The new core curriculum program should better enable all students to meet the new demands and challenges of life in the 21st Century.

In many regards, today's university curriculum looks strikingly similar to that offered a century ago. This is not to say that the study of classical and traditional knowledge has become obsolete. It is instead to assert that political, economic, technological, and cultural changes at the turn of the 21st Century have placed additional demands on our university that we are obligated to meet. If we as a university are to prepare our students to be functioning members of a democratic society, we must give serious consideration to the new types of knowledge and skills they will need to succeed.

A. Specifically, the committee recommends that a new core curriculum program enable all students to accomplish the following:

- Adapt to the discovery of new knowledge and technology.
- Evaluate and question changing ethical principles that are derived from new knowledge and technology.
- Live as participatory citizens in a multilingual and multicultural world.
- Evaluate the qualities and merit of information.
- Access, process, produce, and deliver information.

B. Some examples of courses or programs at the University that have attempted to address this learning outcome include the following:

- Internship programs that serve to enhance in-class lessons with real-world experiences.
- Study Abroad Program that exposes students to the growing complexity of the world outside the Commonwealth.

C. Suggested programs/courses that should be examined more closely to determine their feasibility and effectiveness:

- The committee sees an increasing need for the core curriculum to include a media and visual literacy course. Older ways of "making sense of the world" are rapidly becoming

General Education Reform and Assessment (GERA) Overview

inadequate in the face of our society's ever increasing dependence on media and visual images.

- All our core classes must more actively engage in ethical discussions that continually adapt to our world's rapidly changing technological, cultural, corporate, medical, and communication practices.

V. The new core curriculum program should better enable all students to discover and examine the ambiguity of human knowledge

While we as a University want to help students develop their own stable foundation for life, we also want them to be critical consumers of ideas and assertions. In a world where science, theology, business, health, pop culture, and popular consensus regularly make claims with absolute certainty, universities need to prepare and equip students with the knowledge and skills needed to evaluate their merits.

This type of informed skepticism also needs to be encouraged in our classrooms. The committee believes that all undergraduate classes need to not only teach the prevailing paradigmatic "truths" of their discipline, but to train and encourage students to question and evaluate these lessons. Our university should embrace the dictum that, "*All ideas, no matter how well entrenched or sacred, need to be questioned and evaluated.*" Students, once empowered with this ability, can then decide what ideas and practices in their lives to reaffirm, reform, or reject.

A. Specifically, the committee recommends that a new core curriculum program enable all students to accomplish the following:

- Expose their assumptions to the rigors of investigation and independent thought.
- Question the ideas presented to them in their classes.
- Analyze, compare and evaluate different ways of knowing produced by different, and at times, incongruent, knowledge claims.

General Education Reform and Assessment (GERA) Overview

B. Some examples of courses or programs at the University that have attempted to address this learning outcome include the following:

- The committee recognizes that many of our best teachers have already elegantly incorporated “critical-thinking skills” into their classes. It is our hope, however, that this skill will also serve as a guiding principle and significant criteria in reshaping USP.

C. Suggested programs/courses that should be examined more closely to determine their feasibility and effectiveness:

- All our core courses must provide an atmosphere conducive to a free and open exchange of thoughts and ideas.

Conclusion

This report is not intended to be the last word, but only one in an on-going dialogue that addresses our obligation to our undergraduate students. Like others before us, we are committed to the liberal-arts mission for all students who come to the University of Kentucky. For this mission to be fully recognized, however, it must be built on a solid foundation of learning outcomes. Without such a unifying base, our University Studies Program will lack unity, purpose, and commonly shared goals. As one professor reported in the self-study, “*UK should not have a core that is a façade. . . 30 courses under X rubric does not represent a core*” (p. 26).

Building a core curriculum for our university, however, will not be an easy task. As the same self-study highlighted, there will be significant barriers to reform, some of which have derailed previous efforts at undergraduate reform. Some of the most daunting hurdles that the Implementation Task Force will face in engendering change include the following:

- Increasing first-year enrollment.
- Budgetary constraints and inconsistent funding.
- Department and college territoriality over disciplinary knowledge and course offerings.
- College-specific structures that have hardwired TA lines to USP courses.
- Campus and faculty inertia following from years of repetitive practices.

General Education Reform and Assessment (GERA) Overview

- Professor and administrative anxiety over foundational changes and the unknown of a new curriculum.
- University culture that values research and graduate programs over undergraduate education.

This is not to imply that change will not or cannot happen. This committee, in fact, is extremely optimistic about the future of the University's undergraduate core curriculum given the current administration's commitment to reform and the passion and dedication of our faculty. To help facilitate this change, the committee recommends the following:

- Campus-wide conversations that actively seek out ideas and opinions from all faculty members.
- Strong and influential implementation by a task force that can command attention and respect from the campus at large.
- Strong top-down leadership that can push the faculty out of its inertia and into participatory change.
- Reward system for faculty who commit time and energy towards undergraduate reform.
- Unambiguous and unconditional commitment to *doing no harm* to graduate programs that depend on an intricate relationship with USP for funding.
- Realistic and honest levels of funding. For meaningful and significant reform to take place, funding is a necessity. "Doing more with less" is a pedagogical anathema.

In reviewing our benchmarks' best practices and our University's past creative efforts at undergraduate reform, it has become clear to this committee that with bold leadership, an informed and enthusiastic faculty, and reasonable funding, the University of Kentucky is not far from becoming an American public university that our benchmarks recognize and emulate.

Attachment B

Provost—Senate Council Chair Letter

We are pleased to inform the University community of the formation of the Senate-Provost Planning and Coordination Committee on General Education Reform and Assessment.

This committee is the outgrowth of both formal review processes and ad hoc activities spotlighting the achievements and shortcomings of the University Studies Program that has served undergraduate education for a decade and a half.

The purpose of this committee (see attached committee charge) is to stimulate a campuswide dialogue about the present University Studies Program and to find means for better evaluating the goals, skills, and competencies of the liberal arts core of the undergraduate curriculum appropriate to the twenty-first century.

Associate Provost Phil Kraemer and Senate Council chair Ernie Yanarella will serve as co-chairs of this committee. The other members of the committee are: Larry Grabau, College of Agriculture; Richard Greissman, Assistant Provost; Jane Jensen, College of Education; Deborah Moore, Office of Assessment; Tad Pedigo, director of the Teaching and Academic Services Center; Connie Ray, Vice President for Institutional Research, Planning and Effectiveness; William Rayens, College of Arts and Sciences; Gerald Smith, College of Arts and Sciences; and Ruth Beattie, College of Arts and Sciences. Also serving in a support role are Rebecca Scott, Office of Assessment, and Sheila Brothers, Senate Council Office. We are pleased so fine and representative a group of faculty and administrators have agreed to steer this initiative.

We are also pleased that the President has offered his strong personal and monetary support to this undertaking as evidence of his commitment to quality undergraduate education as a major priority of his administration.

We look forward to contributions to this process by faculty, students, and administrators around the entire campus. We look forward to recommendations generated through this activity that will be formalized by the USP External Review Committee and presented to appropriate faculty representative bodies for consideration and action.

Scott Smith, Interim Provost
Ernie Yanarella, Senate Council Chair