

**University of Kentucky Liberal Education for All Professions:  
UK-LEAP**

A Whitepaper on Revising the University Studies Program  
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In the past few years a national conversation within academia has emerged, one that has a particular resonance for research-intensive institutions like UK. The focus of the conversation is on liberal education – its meaning and place in the undergraduate curriculum. With the issuance of the October 2004 self-study of the University Studies Program (USP), the subsequent release of the report of the USP External Review Committee (ERC) and the formation of the Joint Committee on General Education Reform and Assessment (GERA), the University of Kentucky added its voice to this national discourse on the baccalaureate experience. This white paper attempts to distill those conversations into a curricular framework and its attendant set of learning outcomes such that the exemplary work of the ERC and GERA committees might come to fruition in the near term.

I have relied heavily on the work of the American Council of Colleges and Universities (AAC&U), specifically the LEAP Project (Liberal Education and America’s Promise) [see [www.aacu.org/advocacy](http://www.aacu.org/advocacy)]. The Council’s work has benefited from extensive vetting across numerous national conversations over the past few years. It is also a thoughtful starting point for the next round of conversation at UK.

The national conversation draws a distinction between general and liberal education, the latter understood to be a program of broad study, integrating the knowledge and skill acquisition of so-called lower division studies with its advanced development and application in the context of the major. The LEAP Project has adopted this more ambitious conceptualization of liberal education. The AAC&U-issued document “Making the Case for Liberal Education” states:

AAC&U uses the term “liberal education” to refer to a philosophy of education that empowers individuals with broad knowledge and transferable skills, and that cultivates social responsibility and a strong sense of ethics and values.... It therefore should be available to all students, regardless of their backgrounds, what schools they choose to attend, or what major or field of study they pursue.... In addition to what they learn through their general education requirements, students are also developing liberal education skills and knowledge through in-depth study in a major—including in many professional majors—and in capstone experiences and assignments.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Debra Humphreys, *Making the Case for Liberal Education*, AAC&U (2006), p. 3.

Liberal education, with its emphasis on an integral learning experience over the full span of an undergraduate degree, stands in marked contrast with the reality of our current University Studies Program. The ERC characterized USP as “disconnected,” “fragmented” and an “unsatisfying experience for both students and professors.”<sup>2</sup> Faculty members surveyed by the GERA Committee were equally critical of USP.<sup>3</sup> Focus groups with students elicited little appreciation for the merits of USP and a disconcerting admission that students hurried through their general education requirements in anticipation of the “real learning” to come in their academic majors. It would appear that our current model of general education is not up to the challenge of liberal education in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

The ERC did not hold back in its criticism of the structural problem underlying general education at UK and ventured to offer the broad outline of a remedy:

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 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.<sup>4</sup>

I share the ERC’s conclusion that the starting point for a reconceptualization of general education is the articulation of a new curricular framework within which our current or some new set of courses would be embedded. Indeed, by way of foreshadowing, I believe our current set of disciplinary courses, relying as they do on the discrete subject matter of pre-major courses, are ill-suited for the curricular framework of an ambitious program of liberal education.

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<sup>2</sup> Final Report of the USP External Review Committee (May 2006), p. 7.

<sup>3</sup> See a summary of the faculty survey results posted to the GERA website: [http://www.uky.edu/gera/meachum/key\\_outcomes\\_overview.pdf](http://www.uky.edu/gera/meachum/key_outcomes_overview.pdf)

<sup>4</sup> Final Report of the USP External Review Committee (May 2006), p. 7.

The ERC final report calls for a “coherent framework” of curriculum objectives in which to organize “core learning outcomes” that would identify “the skills and knowledge desired for all graduates of the University of Kentucky, regardless of major...”<sup>5</sup> The committee’s report presents four such curriculum objectives:

- The new general studies program should provide students with essential skills.
- The new general studies program should enable all students to think from multidisciplinary perspectives.
- The new general studies program should engage students in processes of inquiry, analysis and reflection.
- The new general studies program should empower students to engage as participatory citizens in a dynamic multicultural world.

The four-fold curricular framework of the ERC final report closely parallels the curricular model of the LEAP Project from the AAC&U. As we continue to discuss the efficacy of the recommendations contained in the ERC final report and, informed by those recommendations, develop a new model for general education, it may be instructive to note and affirm the alignment between the curriculum objectives and their attendant learning outcomes of the ERC final report and the LEAP Project. I hope this demonstrable measure of external validation, as it were, will encourage us to suspend our doubts about “yet another experiment in educational reform” and permit us to judge the recommendations of the ERC, which form the bedrock of my draft curriculum in liberal education, with a less jaundiced disposition.

The curriculum objectives and learning outcomes advanced by the LEAP project, again which mirror those of the ERC final report, follow:

### **Essential Learning Outcomes<sup>6</sup>**

#### **Intellectual and Practical Skills**

- inquiry, critical and creative thinking
- written and oral communication
- quantitative literacy
- information literacy
- teamwork and problem solving

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<sup>5</sup> Final Report of the USP External Review Committee (May 2006), p. 2.

<sup>6</sup> Debra Humphreys, *Making the Case for Liberal Education*, AAC&U (2006), p. 3.

### **Knowledge of Human Cultures and the Natural and Physical World**

- grounded in study of the sciences and mathematics, social sciences, humanities, histories, languages, and the arts
- focused through engagement with big questions, both contemporary and enduring

### **Individual and Social Responsibilities**

- civic knowledge and engagement—local and global
- intercultural knowledge and competence
- ethical reasoning and action
- foundations and skills for lifelong learning

### **Integrative Learning**

- synthesis and advanced accomplishment across general and specialized studies
- the demonstrated capacity to adapt knowledge, skills, and responsibilities to new settings and questions

The Joint Committee on General Education Reform and Assessment was very careful to incorporate assessment of outcomes as integral to the reform of general education. In this regard, GERA anticipated the emphasis on accountability embedded in the Spellings Commission report on postsecondary education. Any reform of USP must incorporate the following elements:

- ongoing assessment and improvement strategies
- embedded assessment within pedagogical context, wherever possible
- assessment of “value added” via pre- and post- testing
- faculty ownership of assessment

In this regard, we might give serious consideration to national instruments such as the Collegiate Learning Assessment as an important component our outcomes measurement.

## **University of Kentucky Liberal Education for All Professions: The UK-LEAP Curriculum**

For purposes of developing a new Liberal Education curriculum, I will assume we will continue to operate within a standard 120-credit (or so) graduation requirement acquired mostly through 3-4 credit courses in a mix of large and small class settings. There are no other models to speak of, especially in large public research university settings. Furthermore, the new UK-LEAP curriculum will require a deliberate and pervasive change in pedagogical approach, one that incorporates (as appropriate):

- clarity as to learning objectives and desired outcomes
- active and interactive learning
- technology assisted learning
- group and team activities
- outcomes assessment and continuous improvement

In particular, every course offered in partial fulfillment of the UK-LEAP curriculum would have to specify in the course catalog the skills and learning outcomes it incorporates. To ensure the success of UK-LEAP, we will need every faculty member who teaches undergraduates to engage in such pedagogy. We may explore the desirability of a required Summer Faculty Development Institute for all faculty members who are involved in undergraduate education to help with this effort.

Furthermore, I suggest that UK-LEAP should have the following additional characteristics:

- Reflects the mission and core values of the University of Kentucky
- Employs the use of common conceptual framework across courses offered by numerous departments to satisfy a particular UK-LEAP requirement
- Integrated with and reinforced within the majors (i.e., NOT a 2+2 model)
- Consistent with the realities of a large undergraduate body within a public research university context

What then might a draft curriculum look like?

## A Draft Curriculum for UK-LEAP

### Essential Skills

- Writing
- Information Literacy
- Quantitative/Logical Reasoning
- Oral Communication

### Common Studies I: Foundations

#### Tier I

- Inquiry in the Humanities
- Inquiry in the Social Sciences
- Inquiry in the Natural & Physical Sciences

#### Tier II

Additional immersion in the 3 Knowledge Areas

### Common Studies II: Education for Citizenship

- Ethics
- American Cultures
- Global Issues
- Personal Finance
- Second Language <sup>7</sup>

### Integration and Application

- Capstone Experience in the Major

### Essential Skills

These are aimed at achieving the objective of Intellectual and Practical Skills. Writing and Quantitative/Logical Reasoning skills are to be honed through a first semester intensive course and then reinforced throughout the rest of the undergraduate years. Information Literacy and Oral Communication skills are integrated into the curriculum throughout the undergraduate years. The learning outcomes of Essential Skills include: <sup>8</sup>

- Communicate effectively, both in writing and orally, using generally accepted methods for presentation, organization and debate.
- Identify the role that mathematics plays in the world; and demonstrate and interpret mathematical skills necessary to be an informed, constructive, and reflective citizen.
- Critically evaluate the quality of statistical results that permeate our daily lives, competently perform and interpret basic data analyses; calculate and interpret

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<sup>7</sup> A second language is required of those students who did not complete as high school students at least two years of study in one foreign language.

<sup>8</sup> Final Report of the USP External Review Committee (May 2006), pp. 9-10.

constructs associated with confidence, risk, and inference.

- Analyze, interpret, and critically evaluate messages that images contain --- in print media, television, film, advertising, the internet, and the museum.
- Locate, retrieve, evaluate, analyze, manipulate, and use information encountered in a variety of formats.

The preponderance of the course work in Essential Skills would be offered by the College of Arts and Sciences and the College of Communications and Information Studies. Libraries faculty would also play an instrumental role in the development of materials for Essential Skills, notably in the area of information literacy.

### Common Studies I

The course work for Common Studies I consists of a two-tiered requirement. The first tier is a set of three foundational courses that explore the epistemologies that inform and shape the nature of intellectual inquiry within the three broad knowledge areas - the humanities, social & behavioral sciences, and the natural and physical sciences. What are the analytical and methodological tools of the knowledge areas? How do Humanities frame the problems and interpret the subject matter of their intellectual inquiries? What are the deep structures of scientific inquiry; and how do researchers across the social sciences employ the methodologies and interpretative lenses of both qualitative and quantitative inquiry? The preliminary report of the External Review Committee captures the spirit of this curricular component when it writes:

[W]e 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.”<sup>9</sup>

The courses in Common Studies I would emphasize process over content, the latter used more to illustrate and document the nature of the intellectual inquiry. The expectation is that students would complete these three Foundations courses in their first year, ideally in the first semester. Additional immersion in each of the three knowledge areas of Common Studies I through the second tier requirement might involve course work in other lower-division courses or approved courses in a student’s academic major. It is expected that the second tier courses of Common Studies I will also reinforce Essential Skills.

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<sup>9</sup> Preliminary Report of the USP External Review Committee (May 2006), p. 5.

The learning outcomes for Common Studies I include: <sup>10</sup>

- Synthesize materials from multiple disciplines.
- Integrate ideas from various disciplines.
- Apply theories and methods across multiple disciplines.
- Learn from multiple and competing perspectives.
- Evaluate assumptions and question ideas through basic critical reflection and independent thought.
- Analyze, compare and evaluate different ways of knowing produced by different, and at times, incongruent, knowledge claims.

Given that the three knowledge areas are broadly conceived, faculty from across the University would be expected to participate in the foundations of inquiry courses, perhaps as follows:

Foundations of Inquiry in the Humanities  
Arts and Sciences  
Design  
Fine Arts

Foundations of Inquiry in the Social Sciences  
Agriculture  
Arts and Sciences  
Business and Economics  
Communications  
Education  
Social Work

Foundations of Inquiry in the Natural & Physical Sciences  
Agriculture  
Arts and Sciences  
Engineering

### Common Studies II

The context for Common Studies II is captured in the language John Adams composed for the Constitution of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts: “Wisdom and knowledge, as well as virtue, diffused generally among the body of people being necessary for the preservation of their rights and liberties; and these depend on spreading the opportunities and advantages of education....” <sup>11</sup> We must provide that education which holds the best promise of nurturing students who as members of their adult communities will actively

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<sup>10</sup> Final Report of the USP External Review Committee (May 2006), pp. 11-13.

<sup>11</sup> As cited in Ann Colby, et al., *Educating Citizens: Preparing America’s Undergraduates for Lives of Moral and Civic Responsibility*. (2003), p. vii.



and productively participate in the affairs of public life, regardless of their profession. The course content of American Cultures should be intentionally multidisciplinary, dealing with the fabric of American society, from both historical and contemporary perspectives, and including a principal exploration of the ways in which race, ethnicity, class, gender, and globalization shape the shared and disparate experiences of Americans.

Furthermore, courses in American Cultures will explore the complexities of living in a pluralistic and diverse contemporary society. The ERC final report asserts:

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 general studies 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 outside of our Commonwealth's borders. We must also ensure that our students are prepared, intellectually and ethically, to develop their own informed worldview, and once equipped, to confront pressing questions of identity: "who they are," "what their rights and responsibilities as citizens of their community, state, nation, and world are," and "how they can be sensitive to multicultural differences."<sup>12</sup>

Global Issues also provides an opportunity, so thoroughly documented in the GERA and ERC final reports as a felt need of the faculty, to approach global concerns from multidisciplinary perspectives.

The learning outcomes of Common Studies II should be integrated with pre-major and major curricula to the maximum extent possible. For example, the major curriculum of a nursing student would automatically incorporate the ethics part of Common Studies II, since bioethics is an accreditation requirement. The global component could be incorporated from a variety of sources ranging from course work to education abroad.

The learning outcomes for Common Studies II include:

- To develop a deep respect for cultural differences
- To understand how power relationships may shape cultural practices.
- To cultivate and apply one's understanding of self as a global citizen
- To cultivate a capacity for civic engagement
- To explore and affirm the ethical basis for personal and civic behavior
- To develop a rich historical and comparative understanding of American cultures and the role that race, ethnicity, gender and class have played in shaping contemporary American cultures

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<sup>12</sup> Final Report of the USP External Review Committee (May 2006), p. 16.

- To understand and better negotiate the complexities of living in a pluralistic and diverse contemporary society
- Evaluate costs, benefits, and the limitations of resources; make informed choices as consumers, producers, savers, investors, and citizens; understand the basics of income distribution, interest rates, inflation, unemployment, investment, and risk.
- Examine and apply the basic scientific principles which govern natural systems to evaluate critically the consequences of human activity on local, regional, and global natural systems.
- Analyze and critically evaluate the impact of health choices from both a personal and societal perspective.

Many of these outcomes need to be incorporated into and/or reinforced by the study in the student's major area.

### Integration and Application

The final element of UK-LEAP consists of a capstone experience. The capstone experience builds upon the liberal education curriculum. It provides the opportunity for students to bring to bear within the context of the major the knowledge, skills and sensibilities gained in UK-LEAP. Unlike, however, the more traditional approach to the capstone experience, one wholly bound by the course content of the major, the UK-LEAP requirement would provide a meaningful opportunity to integrate the liberal learning gained through UK-LEAP with the specialized knowledge of the student's major field.

The overarching learning outcome of the capstone experience might include:

- to demonstrate the ability to conceptualize and plan a complex project relate to one's major that incorporates one of the themes of Common Studies II;
- to demonstrate the ability to gather and critically analyze a significant body of information incorporating a mode of intellectual inquiry from Common Studies I;
- to demonstrate the ability to identify, discuss and evaluate the ethical and societal implications of the project's findings;
- to demonstrate the ability to prepare and present effectively, in both oral and written form, the project's major findings.

Thus, an engineering student might do a research project on the global supply chain as it pertains to her field; a history student might undertake a comparison of societal reaction to the introduction of in-vitro fertilization to that of cloning; an art major might research and defend the argument that investment in the arts is a critical element in the viability of contemporary communities; or a nursing major might examine the ethical implications of extending life through technological advances in medical science.