

# **REPORT ON HIGHER LEARNING COMMISSION ACCREDITATION AND INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW OF GENERAL EDUCATION: UW - LA CROSSE**

## **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

### **BACKGROUND**

The voluntary processes of accreditation and re-accreditation by the Higher Learning Commission (HLC) of the North Central Association (NCA) provide UW System institutions with an opportunity to evaluate and advance academic quality and institutional health. The Education Committee is provided with a summary of the HLC accreditation visits, followed by a presentation by and discussion with representatives from the institution. In conjunction with the HLC report, *Academic Information Series 1 (ACIS-1)* requires the institution provide the Education Committee with a report on the institution's General Education program. The report should include discussion of: (1) the institution's philosophy of general education, including specific goals for the general education curriculum; (2) an overview of the current general education program; (3) a description of how the general education curriculum provides students with opportunities to achieve institutional goals; and (4) a description of an ongoing assessment process for reviewing and improving the general education program.

In April 2006, an eleven-person HLC Evaluation Team visited the University of Wisconsin-La Crosse campus to conduct a comprehensive evaluation for continued institutional accreditation. The visit also included review of a Change Request to offer a Doctor of Physical Therapy (DPT) in collaboration with the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee. The Team concluded that the UW-La Crosse continues to meet all criteria and conditions for accreditation and enthusiastically approved the request to offer the DPT. Furthermore the Team recommended a full ten-year interval prior to the next comprehensive review.

### **REQUESTED ACTION**

This item is presented for information purposes only; no action is required.

### **DISCUSSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

In spring 2004, Provost Elizabeth Hitch used the campus newsletter to announce the position of Self-Study Coordinator. The position was limited to tenured faculty members, and with the coordinator was charged with leading the self-study. Provost Hitch appointed Dorothy Zeisler-Vralstad to the position. Dr. Zeisler-Vralstad assembled a steering committee to address the five criteria. The steering committee, which began meeting in May 2004, represented a cross-section of the campus population with faculty from each of the colleges, associate deans, and academic staff from student advising, counseling and testing, affirmative action, and international education. The steering committee members served as chairs of subcommittees representing each of the five major criteria as defined by the HLC. With the formation of the subcommittees, representation across campus broadened to 42 participants to include classified staff and additional academic staff from university relations, career services, instructional technology services, the business development center, multicultural student

services, student centers, and continuing education and extension. Additional participants were included as consultants such as the Institutional Researcher, Chief Information Officer (CIO), Associate Registrar, and Director of the Center of Teaching and Learning, to name a few. In December 2005, Dr. Zeisler-Vralstad resigned from UW-La Crosse, and the Provost appointed Dr. Carmen Wilson VanVoorhis as the Self-Study Coordinator.

The HLC Evaluation Team complimented UW-La Crosse for the thoroughness and preparation of the Self-Study; they found the report to be thoughtful and informative. The Team concluded that UW-La Crosse meets the core components of each of the five major criteria. Specifically, the Team confirmed that UW-La Crosse: (1) operates with integrity to ensure the fulfillment of its mission, (2) appropriately allocates resources for evaluation and planning to ensure quality improvement, (3) provides evidence of student learning and teaching effectiveness, (4) promotes a life of learning for its faculty, administration, staff and students, and (5) identifies and serves its constituencies in a ways that both value and appreciate. The team specifically recognized several areas of significant progress and practice, including, an impressive commitment to students, a strong academic advising program, Murphy Library's exceptional resources and services, the Master of Education and Professional Development Learning Communities program, and a strong commitment to the success of students with documented disability needs. In addition, the Team approved UW-La Crosse's request to offer the DPT noting, ". . . the team is fully confident that UW-L has the knowledge, expertise, experience, and resources (including top-notch faculty and students) to successfully offer the Doctor of Physical therapy degree program, independently or in the proposed consorcial agreement with the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee."

While the team confirmed UW-La Crosse meets the accreditation criteria, they did identify three areas of continued challenge and recommended monitoring reports in those areas. All monitoring reports are due January 1, 2009. First, assessment of student learning was identified as a concern during the previous, 1996, comprehensive visit. As such, the team noted UW-La Crosse should be further along in efforts to implement a campus-wide assessment program. The monitoring report is to confirm that assessment activities are integrated and implemented on a institution-wide basis. Second, while UW-La Crosse identifies diversity as a priority and has several offices and committees in support of this priority, the team was concerned that there was not strong, clear leadership from senior administration for diversity efforts. The monitoring report is to provide evidence of a review of the organizational structure of committees and offices working on diversity efforts, as well as in institutional plan for diversity that has senior administration commitment. Third, general education also was identified as a concern during the previous, 1996, comprehensive visit. The team noted that while progress has been made, the issue should have been resolved by the current visit. The monitoring report is to include evidence of implementation of a revised general education program that supports the institutional and general education missions.

## **HLC REVIEW OF GENERAL EDUCATION**

The HLC Evaluation Team reviewed UW-La Crosse's General Education program within the context of the comprehensive evaluation. As reported, the team expressed concerns that UW-La Crosse had not made sufficient progress in resolving challenges identified ten years earlier. Specifically, the team noted that the identified student learning outcomes should be consistent with the mission, structure, and content of the general education program. The team did not recommend any

specific program or approach, but rather directed the leadership of the Faculty Senate to complete revisions to the General Education program. In conclusion, “the team simply and very strongly recommends and urges the faculty to complete the revision of the General Education program, including developing a plan for systematically assessing this program, and then implement it.”

## **INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW OF GENERAL EDUCATION**

The General Education program at UW – La Crosse, implemented in the fall of 1991 as the common educational experience for undergraduates, is uniquely concerned with the broad education of the whole person and is designed to help students become more intellectually skilled through inquiry-based teaching and learning. In the UW-La Crosse undergraduate catalog, students are informed that “the primary purpose of the program is to cultivate knowledge, skills, and dispositions essential for independent learning and thinking and consists of two major components: skills and liberal studies. Skills courses improve students’ abilities to learn, think, and communicate effectively. Liberal studies courses engage students in the study of important areas of knowledge and experience and focus central questions, issues, and problems we share as people and as members of the same society.”

Oversight of the program is accomplished by the Faculty Senate General Education Committee (GEC) made up of nine faculty members including at least two representatives each from the College of Liberal Studies and the College of Science and Health and one representative from the College of Business Administration. In addition, one student selected by the Student Association is a voting member and consultants from each of the three colleges, the Registrar’s Office, and the Provost/Vice Chancellor’s Office serve as ex officio members of the committee. In early fall 2000, Faculty Senate recommended the position of a Director of General Education; the first director was appointed in February 2001. The director is a voting committee member and until recently, automatically served as Chair of the Committee. The Director of General Education position was approved, in part, in response to concerns of continuity and leadership of the program identified in the 1996 NCA accreditation report. To help increase continuity of the program, Faculty Senate approved by-law changes that allowed members to serve on the committee up to five-years.

## **RECENT GENERAL EDUCATION INITIATIVES**

Since the appointment of a Director, several initiatives have taken place and are briefly highlighted below. In addition, a number of direct and indirect assessment activities have been undertaken beginning in 1996. Some of these are also briefly highlighted below.

- Development of Learning Outcomes. The GEC undertook a review of the goals of the program and of the assessment plan as per the charge from Faculty Senate. As part of the review of goals, and as a means to develop a more effective assessment approach, GEC developed specific learning outcomes for the program. As the outcomes were being developed, feedback was regularly solicited from the broader campus community. An outside consultant worked with the GEC on developing learning outcomes. And, several on-campus workshops focused on using outcomes to guide learning activities and assessment of learning were offered to Department Chairs, Undergraduate Program Directors, and other faculty. Faculty Senate approved the learning outcomes in the fall of 2005 (see Appendix A).
- Departmental review of courses to evaluate which outcomes were being addressed in current program. As part of the development of the final draft of learning outcomes, and as per a

Faculty Senate charge, each department offering a general education course was asked to identify which of the outcomes were being addressed at a significant level in each course. Results from this evaluation as well as other types of feedback from faculty were used to edit and refine the outcomes into the final draft that was ultimately approved by Faculty Senate.

- Faculty Development. Teams made up of GEC members and/or faculty who taught general education courses were sent to national general education conferences and workshops to help them develop a broader understanding of general education as a key component of the baccalaureate degree and to increase understanding of learning outcomes and assessment of student learning.
- Human Rights Theme. GEC adopted a human rights theme and asked faculty across the general education curriculum to incorporate the theme, if possible, into their general education courses. The purpose was to create a sense of coherence or greater connections among courses across the curriculum. Faculty and students have responded positively to this initiative.
- First Year Seminar. The one-credit elective freshmen seminar was approved as a general education course. The course focuses on “Who has the right to an education?”
- General Education Design Team. A cross-disciplinary team of faculty were brought together to (1) review all information about the current program, (2) identify major concerns or problems with the current program, and (3) make recommendations for program improvement. The group met over the summer of 2005 and issued a report and recommendations for program revision. Listening sessions were held in Fall 2005 to gain feedback from campus constituencies about the report and recommendations.
- Program Name Change. Design Team and GEC recommended and Faculty Senate approved a name change from General Education to University Core Curriculum to raise the image of the program and reflect the common experience purpose of the program. The name change is effective Fall 2007.
- Mission and vision statements. GEC developed mission and vision statements to succinctly articulate to constituencies the purpose of the program and, in conjunction with the learning outcomes, to guide curricular revisions. Faculty Senate approved these statements in Fall 2005 (see Appendix B).
- Revision of Curriculum—In Progress. GEC used the design team report and recommendations, assessment information, and feedback gained from listening sessions to revise the design team curriculum proposal. These revisions are still in progress, but a proposal is expected to be presented to Faculty Senate in spring 2007.

Several assessment activities, both direct and indirect, have taken place over the past 10 years. Whenever possible, results are being considered in curriculum revisions. Some of these assessment activities are highlighted below.

- Assessment of scientific reasoning occurred in 1995-1996 and again with different instruments in 2004-2005. Results suggest that scientific reasoning of our students could be strengthened. Various options are being considered by the GEC, including requiring all students to take a minimum of two science courses as well as possible changes in pedagogy or types of science courses offered.
- Assessment of student learning in “Self and Society (social science)” and “Art: The Aesthetic Experience” categories were completed in 1996. In both areas, students showed an increase in

understanding and/or appreciation of these disciplinary areas; although, their overall levels of understanding were marginally improved from pre- to post-tests.

- Global Understanding was assessed 2004 and again in 2005 using three different instruments. This area was selected for assessment since a task force on internationalization of the curriculum was exploring, among other things, the option of requiring an international experience. Results suggest students show marginal ability to understand or apply a global perspective to problems. However, students who had taken more global perspective courses scored higher than others. GEC is considering possible curricular changes and/or pedagogical changes that could positively impact student learning in this area.
- An ACT assessment of critical thinking was administered to freshmen and seniors in 2003-2004. In this cross-sectional study both freshmen and seniors' mean scores were above the national average.
- Several indirect measures have been used to evaluate student perceptions and beliefs about the general education program. Focus groups of graduating seniors conducted in 1996 and surveys of graduating seniors in 1996 and of seniors in 2003-2004 provide mixed results. Students in the focus groups and in both surveys indicated that the program helped them develop specific skills such as writing and speaking, and the majority felt general education was an important part of their education. However, significant numbers of students also suggested that the program lacked coherence and, in some ways, courses were repetition of high school. Students in the focus groups could not articulate the goals or overall purpose of the program and the majority of students responding to the surveys did not feel the program added substantially to their understanding of liberal studies areas. Significant number of responses suggested that courses should be more connected to their majors or to "real life." Both positive and negative perspectives of the program were often related to specific instructors, and students suggested a smaller program and better advising about the program as ways to improve the program.

Although assessment of student learning in general education has been conducted and will be continuing, GEC will be including a more systematic assessment plan as part of the curriculum revision proposal. And, in line with NCA recommendations, GEC will build into this plan mechanisms to more systematically use assessment results to inform curricular, pedagogical, or other program changes.

GEC has been working diligently to keep the campus informed and to garner feedback on proposed changes. However, GEC, working in conjunction with Faculty Senate and others, must work more effectively to develop a culture of support for general education as a key element of the baccalaureate degree. The Design Team and NCA both articulated a concern that the campus lacks a common vision about general education. As one strategy, GEC's goal is to meet with as many departments as possible prior to finalization of the curricular revision proposals. The revised proposal has already been discussed in Chair/Program Director meetings in two colleges and will be discussed soon in the third college. In addition, more faculty development opportunities will be provided in the future. GEC is committed to providing a high quality program that reflects the academic vision as found in the strategic plan:

“deliver [a] high-quality, well-rounded education in intellectually stimulating environments that foster and produce: critical thinkers, lifelong learners, skilled and collaborative practitioners, and global citizens who use knowledge and technology with wisdom and ethics. The academic programs are multidisciplinary, culturally

relevant, and flexible in their design in order to be accessible and responsive to a diverse community of learners.” ([Strategic Plan](#), 2003).

Thus, student learning will continue to guide deliberations and decision-making about revisions to the program. Furthermore, GEC is now considering using the newly published Association for General and Liberal Studies’ *Guide to Review and Assessment of General Education* as a means for continuous quality improvement in the program.

## **Appendix A: UW- L General Education Student Learning Outcomes**

### **Goal: Foundations of Knowledge**

#### **Students will be able to:**

- Express ideas, facts, opinions and beliefs in ways that are relevant and appropriate to the audience, context, purpose and genre
- State an idea/argument and develop it in a logical, organized form using conventional grammar, punctuation and formatting
- Formulate and support ideas with sufficient reasoning, evidence and persuasive appeals, and proper attribution
- Accurately summarize and interpret the purposes and main ideas of texts and performances
- Use a variety of resources and current technology to locate, retrieve and evaluate relevant sources and information
- Construct and use models to analyze, explain or predict phenomena
- Use mathematical and logical methods to solve problems
- Identify fundamental principles, theories, concepts, methodologies, tools and issues from various disciplines
- Synthesize information from different disciplines and perspectives to solve problems, gain new experiences, or create new things
- Engage effectively in the process of collaborative work and identify factors that facilitate and impede effective communication

### **Goal: Aesthetic Perspective and Meaning**

#### **Students will be able to:**

- Identify appropriate methods for understanding and interpreting the aesthetics of various works
- Evaluate artistic presentations using appropriate language and patterns of thought
- Evaluate artistic presentations as commentary on society and the human experience
- Identify diverse elements (artistic, scientific, religious, cultural) that can provide meaning for human existence
- Explain factors that make their own lives meaningful

### **Goal: Inquiry and Critical Thinking**

#### **Students will be able to:**

- Identify and use methods of inquiry appropriate to a given problem
- Identify valid procedures for gathering empirical data to solve particular problems
- Investigate and assess hypotheses using appropriate methods
- Critically assess the reasoning and evidence supporting or refuting a thesis
- Distinguish between fact, opinion, observation and inference
- Detect patterns underlying phenomena and draw reasonable inferences from information
- Reason logically, creatively and independently
- Explain the impact of science and technology on the environment, human experience and social change
- Explain how content is shaped by the context in which it was created

### **Goal: Personal, Social and Global Responsibility**

#### **Students will be able to:**

- Describe how cultural and individual differences have shaped perspectives and contributed to patterns of privilege and oppression
- Explain how values and ideas of cultures have evolved and how patterns of globalization have shaped the modern world
- Recognize and respect different ways of thinking and communicating
- Explain the rationales for cultural behaviors different from one's own
- Communicate effectively with members of another culture
- Identify diverse moral and ethical perspectives, principles, and systems of evaluation
- Articulate their moral values, the processes they use to make ethical decisions and their perspective on current ethical issues
- Explain how knowledge from various disciplines is essential to individual and societal health and well-being
- Identify their strategies for involvement, leadership and civic engagement
- Analyze the impact their decisions and choices have on themselves and others
- Practice and uphold standards of academic integrity and intellectual honesty
- Articulate how their participation in campus and community events and in the democratic process has made a difference in their lives and the lives of others

## **Appendix B: UW-L's General Education Mission and Vision Statements**

### **General Education Mission and Vision Statements**

The mission of the General Education Program at UW-La Crosse is to develop life-long learners who will be engaged as knowledgeable and responsible citizens in a diverse and ever-changing world.

It is the University's vision that the core curriculum encourages students to

- § discover connections between disciplines
- § consider one's major in a broader context
- § cultivate knowledge, skills, and habits of mind essential for independent learning and thinking.