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General Education Reform: Opportunities for Institutional Alignment

Scott M. Fuess Jr. and
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Introduction and Review

In the process of strategic planning, any academic department should seek to align itself with the institution's broader goals. To underscore its strategic importance, a department often emphasizes the record of its faculty research and its ability to attract grant funding. On the teaching side, a department is likely to note its importance because of the students enrolled as majors in that particular discipline. Cases are typically made to senior administrators by stressing the prominence of the department in supporting graduate student education, preprofessional training, or liberal arts and science education for undergraduate students. So it is by emphasizing discipline-specific research accomplishments or major-specific aspects of the teaching mission that departments usually try to make a case for their strategic importance. But for departments seeking alignment with institutional goals, there is another important opportunity at hand, involving general education.

American undergraduate education typically involves some combination of general education and a major field of study, with many majors involving preprofessional training. General education programs often include some combination of basic skills (writing or mathematics) and a sampling of subject areas (either a distribution across departments or some interdisciplinary survey). For a concise history of general education and research related to it, see Stevens (2001).

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For many students general education seems to be a parallel set of requirements not connected to the major field of study. It may not always be clear to students why and how some sampling across subject areas is relevant. The connection can be tenuous between basic skills courses (usually encountered early in an undergraduate's career) and in-depth study in a specific major (often later in the student's career). So it is not surprising that students can regard general education with exasperation. Indeed, many may view general education as a "distraction" keeping them from the "important stuff" encountered in major field courses.

Faculty are frequently exasperated with general education too. General or introductory courses may be underfunded and overcrowded, with many of them taught by temporary instructors or graduate students. Interdisciplinary survey courses may be patched together, lacking cohesion. Professors with grant funding often seek to "buy out" teaching general education courses. For faculty general education also can seem like an "obstacle," preventing advanced instruction in specialized field courses.

Presently many colleges and universities are pursuing reforms of their general education programs. Indeed, the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) has compiled a bibliography of curriculum reform (<http://www.aacu.org/resources/generaleducation/genedbibliography.cfm>). According to a report issued by Hart Research Associates (2009), 89 percent of AAC&U member institutions are "in some stage of assessing or modifying their general education program" (p. 2). In that survey, 56 percent of AAC&U institutions report that general education has become a more important priority, but less than half "feel that their general education programs are well integrated with students' major requirements" (p. 2).

The current emphasis on general education reform is nothing new. In his historical account, Stevens (2001) writes that debates about general education and reform efforts have occurred repeatedly. A quick review of the literature confirms this assertion. Accounts of contemporary reform efforts have been compiled by the AAC&U (2002, 2004a, 2004b) and Ratcliff, Johnson, and Gaff (2004). For a look back to the 1990s and 1980s, see Gaff (1983, 1999), Miller (1988), and Schneider and Shoenberg (1998). Looking further back to the 1970s and 1960s, see Arden (1979), Belknap and Kuhns (1977), Bell (1966), Kornfeld (1979), and Williams (1968).

General education reform is a momentous change for an institution, which provides numerous opportunities for departments. Recently the University of Nebraska–Lincoln (UNL) completed a major reform of general education, scrapping its old program and replacing it with an entirely new one. UNL's old program featured (1) a distribution of courses across subject areas and

(2) courses supposed to integrate a number of prescribed pedagogical features. In contrast, the new program is based on *achievement* of specific skill and knowledge outcomes, all of which are subject to *assessment*.

This article recounts Nebraska's experience with general education reform. It illustrates how departments were able to steer the university to a more transparent program for students to follow. At the same time, many departments were able to clarify their own strategic planning and improve their alignment with university objectives. Moving to the new program required departments, especially in professional schools, to reconfigure their major course requirements so that general education could be integrated with majors. Moreover, in the arts and sciences several traditional suppliers of general education courses discovered opportunities to broaden the audience for their courses and sharpen the appeal of their majors. These findings should be instructive for other institutions involved in general education reform.

General Education Reform at the University of Nebraska–Lincoln

Background

The University of Nebraska–Lincoln is both the land-grant and the comprehensive public university for the state of Nebraska, serving as “the flagship campus of the University of Nebraska [system]” (Institutional Research and Planning, 2009, p. 5). In fall 2009 there were nearly nineteen thousand undergraduate students enrolled, of whom roughly fifteen thousand were from the state of Nebraska (approximately six hundred from foreign countries). UNL has eight undergraduate colleges: (1) Agricultural Sciences and Natural Resources, (2) Architecture, (3) Arts and Sciences, (4) Business Administration, (5) Education and Human Sciences, (6) Engineering, (7) Hixson-Lied College of Fine and Performing Arts, and (8) Journalism and Mass Communications. There are 122 undergraduate programs, which includes duplication of programs that are shared; the number of unduplicated majors/programs is one hundred.

For the 2008–9 academic year, just over half of credit hours, 50.5 percent, were taught by the Arts and Sciences College, with the other colleges combining for the other 49.5 percent. Of the other colleges, Business Administration and Education and Human Sciences each accounted for nearly 11 percent of credit hours. The smallest colleges, Architecture and Journalism and Mass Communications, accounted for 2.0 percent and 2.7 percent of credit hours, respectively. Putting enrollment in some perspective, some colleges are particularly crowded. Combining tenured/tenure-track and non-tenure-track faculty,

the UNL-wide figure is 334 credit hours per instructor; the Business College is under the greatest stress, with 623 credit hours per faculty member, followed by the Arts and Sciences College, with 509 credit hours per faculty member.

The Old General Education Program and Need for Reform

In his 2005 State of the University address, UNL Chancellor Harvey Perlman announced that the university's general education program needed to be reformed. He had good reason. The program in place at the time, known as the Comprehensive Education Program (CEP), was widely viewed as complicated and unattractive to students. When it was implemented in 1995, CEP was unique in its design. The program had two components: Essential Studies (ES) and Integrative Studies (IS). To provide students with a broad base of knowledge, ES-designated courses covered eight different subject areas: (1) communication; (2) mathematics and statistics; (3) human behavior, culture, and social organization; (4) science and technology; (5) historical studies; (6) humanities; (7) arts; and (8) race, ethnicity, and gender.

To fulfill an "experience requirement," IS-designated courses were supposed to "engage students in actively developing their ability and desire to analyze, evaluate and communicate complex material and positions" (University of Nebraska–Lincoln, 2004, p. 14). IS-designated courses were supposed to integrate seven particular skills: (1) critical thinking; (2) writing; (3) oral expression; (4) analysis of controversies; (5) exploration of assumptions; (6) inquiry through course content into the origins, bases, and consequences of intellectual bias; and (7) consideration of human diversity. To achieve IS certification, courses had to justify how they addressed *all* seven of these items, not just a subset of them. A course could be certified for both IS and ES status. Once a course was certified for ES or IS status, there was no process for possible decertification.

After it had been in place for a decade, it was clear that the CEP program was fraught with problems. CEP listed more than twenty-three hundred courses, yet there was no meaningful oversight of the program. In practice many IS-designated courses failed to address all of the required skills, while many non-IS courses *did* address those skills. Consequently, many students and faculty no longer understood CEP or its relevance. Indeed, CEP was viewed by students and advisers as (1) complicated to follow, (2) an obstacle to timely degree completion, and (3) a barrier to new students, especially transfer students.

In launching general education reform, the UNL administration set a vision for a new program (for details, see <http://www.unl.edu/svcaa/gened/review.shtml>). Among the key characteristics, the new program had to be

- Elegant, simple, and transparent to students, faculty, and advisers,
- Based on student outcomes,
- Integrated with and reinforced within the majors,
- Constructed so as to satisfy the graduation requirements of all UNL undergraduate colleges,
- Accommodating of the full range of undergraduate students (for example, incoming undergraduates, transfer students, distance students, and so on), and
- Sustainable within existing resources.

The Reform Process

Major institutional reform is a daunting task, and replacing a general education program can be especially challenging. On the process of general education reform, see research by Awbrey (2005), Gaff and Wasescha (1991), and Meacham and Ludwig (1997). Not surprisingly, many reform efforts fail. For examples of general education reform at particular institutions, see Dubrow (2004), Reynolds et al. (1998), Smith et al. (2001), and Tetreault and Rhodes (2004). At a multifaceted, research-oriented university like UNL, individual colleges and departments answer to external constituencies and may be subject to parochial interests. As might have been expected, general education reform at UNL was an involved process, which has been detailed by Kean, Mitchell, and Wilson (2008) and Mitchell et al. (2010).

To undertake the task, UNL established two bodies to operate simultaneously. A planning team coordinated the effort, with the team made up of three administrators and six faculty members (representing four of the eight undergraduate colleges). An advisory council provided broader campus perspectives and made recommendations for the new program. The advisory council consisted of the planning team plus seventeen other members, drawn from the ranks of faculty (representing all eight colleges), administrators, staff, and students.

The planning team and advisory council spent two and a half years holding meetings and hearings, attending conferences on curriculum reform, and consulting with campus colleagues and external stakeholders to draft a new program. Their efforts came to fruition perhaps because their work never veered from one simple question: “What should all undergraduate students—irrespective of their majors and career aspirations—know or be able to do upon graduation?” The result of this concerted reform process was a draft for a new program, which was subsequently approved in 2008 by faculty in each of the eight undergraduate colleges for implementation in 2009.

The New General Education Program: Overview

The new program has two distinguishing characteristics: achievement and assessment. First, it is centered around student *achievement* of ten distinct learning outcomes. The outcomes are designed to establish what students are expected to be able to do rather than some distribution of disciplines they should study. The outcomes are shared by all eight undergraduate colleges. Second, UNL has committed to *assessing* student achievement of the outcomes. Assessment is a critical component because that is how the university intends to keep the program from drifting from its intended purpose and to encourage reflection on pedagogy.

Because the new program is based on students demonstrating achievement of outcomes, it has been dubbed “Achievement-Centered Education” (ACE). For a complete list of the ACE learning outcomes, see Table 1. To be certified as an ACE course, a course must focus on a specific outcome and reinforce at least one of the other outcomes. ACE learning outcomes must be satisfied by work in at least three subject areas (for details, see <http://ace.unl.edu>).

Given the basic question “What should all students know and be able to do?” the ACE program provides students with opportunities to develop and apply relevant skills, knowledge, and social responsibilities regardless of their majors or career plans. As seen in Table 1, Outcomes 1–3 are associated with developing specific practical skills (writing texts in various forms, demonstrating communication competence, and problem solving using quantitative or formal reasoning). The other outcomes build on the practical skills developed in Outcomes 1–3.

Outcomes 4–7 are associated with building and *using* knowledge from different subject areas (namely, the sciences, humanities, social sciences, and arts). Outcomes 8–9 are aimed at developing and exercising individual and social responsibilities (citizenship, global awareness/human diversity). Consistent with UNL’s commitment to undergraduate research, Outcome 10 focuses on combining abilities from the other nine outcomes to generate a scholarly product.

Regarding Outcomes 4–10, up to three of them may be satisfied by work in one subject area. Thus, it is possible for a student to satisfy a meaningful chunk of general education requirements in one or two subject areas or within the student’s home college. Thus, general education need not be a parallel set of requirements unrelated to majors or something encountered only in the early years of undergraduate careers.

The ACE program requirements apply to all UNL undergraduate students. Each student must pass an ACE-certified course for each outcome, meaning a university general education requirement of ten ACE-certified courses (thirty credit hours). UNL may certify a course for up to two learning outcomes, but a student taking a dual-certified course is permitted to count it for only one of the outcomes, with

TABLE I Achievement-Centered Education: Institutional Objectives and Student Learning Outcomes

Objective	Outcome
<p>Develop intellectual and practical skills, including proficiency in written, oral, and visual communication; inquiry techniques; critical and creative thinking; quantitative applications; information assessment; teamwork; and problem solving.</p>	<p>1. Write texts, in various forms, with an identified purpose, that respond to specific audience needs, incorporate research or existing knowledge, and use applicable documentation and appropriate conventions of format and structure.</p>
	<p>2. Demonstrate communication competence in one or more of the following ways: (a) by making oral presentations with supporting materials, (b) by leading and participating in problem-solving teams, (c) by employing a repertoire of communication skills for developing and maintaining professional and personal relationships, or (d) by creating and interpreting visual information.</p>
	<p>3. Use mathematical, computational, statistical, or formal reasoning (including reasoning based on principles of logic) to solve problems, draw inferences, and determine reasonableness.</p>
<p>Build knowledge of diverse peoples and cultures and of the natural and physical world through the study of mathematics, sciences and technologies, histories, humanities, arts, social sciences, and human diversity.</p>	<p>4. Use scientific methods and knowledge of the natural and physical world to address problems through inquiry, interpretation, analysis, and the making of inferences from data, to determine whether conclusions or solutions are reasonable.</p>
	<p>5. Use knowledge, historical perspectives, analysis, interpretation, critical evaluation, and the standards of evidence appropriate to the humanities to address problems and issues.</p>
	<p>6. Use knowledge, theories, methods, and historical perspectives appropriate to the social sciences to understand and evaluate human behavior.</p>
<p>Exercise individual and social responsibilities through the study of ethical principles and reasoning, application of civic knowledge, interaction with diverse cultures, and engagement with global issues.</p>	<p>7. Use knowledge, theories, or methods appropriate to the arts to understand their context and significance.</p>
	<p>8. Explain ethical principles, civics, and stewardship and their importance to society.</p>
<p>Integrate these abilities and capacities, adapting them to new settings, questions, and responsibilities.</p>	<p>9. Exhibit global awareness or knowledge of human diversity through analysis of an issue.</p>
	<p>10. Generate a creative or scholarly product that requires broad knowledge, appropriate technical proficiency, information collection, synthesis, interpretation, presentation, and reflection.</p>

the student choosing which outcome the course will satisfy for his or her program. Thus, there are no “magic” courses that can be used to satisfy multiple outcomes.

An ACE course approved to satisfy a learning outcome satisfies that outcome in all UNL undergraduate colleges. Each individual college is free to establish college-specific requirements *in addition* to, but not in place of, the university’s ACE requirements.

The new program clearly exhibits key characteristics set forth by the UNL administration. It is simple and transparent and satisfies the graduation requirements of all UNL undergraduate colleges. The ACE program is based on student outcomes. Because ACE is integrated with and reinforced in majors, it is sustainable within existing resources.

The ACE program also helps with respect to different types of “transfer” issues. For students transferring across colleges within UNL, they can simply transfer all ACE-certified courses to meet the UNL-wide ACE requirement. Students can transfer any course from outside UNL that is directly equivalent to a UNL ACE-certified course; even non-UNL courses without direct equivalents may be considered for ACE credit with sufficient documentation.

The ACE Program: Opportunities for Alignment

When facing the prospect of major institutional change, a couple of questions are likely to arise in departments. First, is this reform a chance to leverage new resources? Second, are changes in course requirements a threat to enrollment, so that “turf” must be protected? As noted above, the UNL administration made it clear that general education reform had to be enacted with existing resources and that a meaningful redistribution of resources was unlikely. As noted by Kean et al. (2008), UNL’s reform process was *transparent* throughout, which helped sustain a clear impression that general education is a visible and valuable part of the university’s mission. This combination of transparency and urgency helped prevent meaningful resistance. Perhaps more importantly, many departments spotted opportunities for strategic “alignment.”

Aligning the Institution with Departments

Departments across campus recognized opportunities to tug the university into closer alignment with departmental concerns. First, there was the prospect of creating a simpler program that is easier to administer. Second, there was the chance to ensure decentralized oversight of the program.

A striking feature of UNL’s old general education program was its dizzying complexity, briefly illustrated by the following examples. By state statute, it is

UNL's colleges that have the authority to grant degrees and set requirements. In the old general education program, often it was the case that what counted in one college did not count in another one. So for many UNL students switching colleges, their undergraduate careers were lengthened because the new college would not accept general education courses that the old one would have accepted. Because of such induced delays, some students ran out of financial aid before graduating.

To complete the "Integrative Studies" portion of the old program, students had to pass ten IS-designated courses, with half of them coming from the lower division (freshman- or sophomore-level classes) and the other half coming from the upper division (junior or senior level), with at least one class from each of the sophomore, junior, or senior levels and no more than three classes from a single department. Given this level of complexity, it was difficult to ensure a sufficient array of course offerings in a given semester. So the IS requirement also became an obstacle to timely degree completion. In light of these examples, it is no wonder that the old program was a source of major irritation to students and parents and thus a nemesis for academic advisers and administrators.

During the reform process it was widely perceived that there was a unique opportunity to turn a complex program into one far simpler and more transparent. Because it is simpler for students to understand and follow, it is clearer for academic advisers to explain, making it easier for units to administer. Moreover, it is clearer to show how general education "fits" with major fields of study.

Turning to oversight, Aloï, Gardner, and Lusher (2003) already have documented many difficulties institutions face in assessing general education outcomes. They note that "course-based approaches are becoming more popular as a way to assess general education programs" (p. 243). At UNL, departments have reserved for themselves the key responsibilities in assessment, keeping assessment as close to courses as possible.

The power of the new program is in the hands of individual units. It is individual departments, not some centralized authority, that decide how and which data are collected and which instruments are used to assess achievement. Many UNL colleges and programs already are subject to external accreditation agencies, which have various requirements for assessing student achievement, including some of the ACE outcomes. Consequently, many units are able to incorporate assessment of general education within their existing assessment efforts.

Aligning Departments with the Institution

Besides steering the university into closer alignment with departments, general education reform also gave departments the chance to clarify their strategic

importance and align more closely with UNL's mission. It is instructive to distinguish between professional colleges and the liberal arts and sciences.

In professional colleges and programs subject to external accreditation—including Architecture, Business Administration, Education and Human Sciences, Engineering, and Journalism—many units found synergy between accreditation standards and ACE requirements. Thus, they found ways to support UNL's general education initiative within their existing program constraints.

The case of the Business Administration College is instructive. That college has ACE-certified courses for five of the ten student learning outcomes, meaning that business majors can complete half of their general education requirements inside the college. Specifically, a number of economics and management courses required of all business majors also have been certified for ACE outcomes (specifically, Outcomes 3, 6, 8, and 10), which illustrates how general education outcomes can be integrated with college requirements. Thus, departments like Economics and Management have become vital to the university's new program.

Similarly, departments as varied as Architecture, Advertising, Journalism, and Textiles, Clothing and Design each had courses certified for four of the ten outcomes. Stimulated by the reform process, the College of Education and Human Sciences found that it could reduce the requirement for its secondary education majors from 142 credit hours to 117, enabling students to enroll in elective courses (for the first time) and satisfy degree requirements in four years instead of five. The Architecture, Engineering, and Journalism colleges all proposed for ACE their courses on professional ethics (Outcome 8) and their capstone courses (Outcome 10).

Finally, it is often a challenge for professional schools to engage across campus. In the Business College, the Finance Department saw a chance to serve nonbusiness students by having a "Personal Finance" course certified for ACE (Outcome 6). Likewise, the Journalism College serves business students with its course "Business Communication Strategies," which is certified for the "writing" outcome (Outcome 1).

Turning to the liberal arts and sciences, it is no surprise that the Arts and Sciences College had courses approved for all ten student learning outcomes. Within the college, many departments found ways to integrate their disciplines with ACE requirements.

To date the English Department has been most enterprising, having courses certified for six of the ten ACE outcomes. The department recognized how it provided diverse courses that could satisfy many ACE outcomes, not only the "writing" and "humanities" outcomes (Outcomes 1 and 5) but also the "arts," "citizenship," "diversity/global," and "scholarly product" outcomes (Outcomes 7–10). Other particularly enterprising units have been the Political Science

Department and the Ethnic Studies Program (each with courses certified for five outcomes), as well as the Communication Studies and Philosophy departments (each with courses certified for four outcomes).

Departments such as English, Political Science, and Communication Studies have been strategic in two ways. By incorporating many varied courses in ACE, especially large-enrollment ones, they are credited with providing critical support for the university's new general education program. And by providing courses for so many different learning outcomes, they are making it appealing for students to major or minor in their disciplines.

Seeing the strategic behavior of other departments, the History Department is beginning to revise its offerings in line with ACE, designating different courses for different outcomes. And the Arts and Sciences College as a whole is in consultation with the Engineering College to develop common courses designed to satisfy the "citizenship" outcome (Outcome 8).

Implementing the ACE Program: Early Impressions

Although it is early days for the new ACE program, some impressions are starting to emerge. Whereas the Arts and Sciences College provides courses in all ten outcomes, and many professional schools provide courses for at least five outcomes, colleges like Engineering and Fine and Performing Arts have courses certified in only two or three areas, so they are clearly expecting their majors to go elsewhere on campus to satisfy most of their general education requirements.

While the Arts and Sciences College serves roughly half of UNL's undergraduate enrollment, the college is providing roughly 65 percent of enrollment in ACE-certified courses. The college clearly plays a leading role in the university's new program, which may well encourage even higher numbers of students per faculty. Despite being the most stressed college at UNL in terms of enrollment per faculty, the College of Business Administration nevertheless is supplying nearly 8 percent of the seats in ACE-certified courses.

When it comes to supplying general education courses at UNL, the professional schools, mindful of accreditation requirements, have capitalized by creating general education niches for their majors. Yet the bulk of general education teaching is done by the Arts and Sciences College.

General Education Reform: Lessons from the UNL Experience

Given the context of a multifaceted, research-based university with independent colleges, UNL's experience with general education reform illustrates

that transformational change can occur. Other institutions, regardless of organizational structure, may find helpful four lessons from the UNL experience.

First, as discussed above, UNL's reform effort stayed focused on a single question, "What should all undergraduate students—irrespective of their majors and career aspirations—know or be able to do upon graduation?" Sticking to that question kept the reform effort looking forward to where the general education program should go and avoided backward-looking debates about the merits and faults of the previous program.

More to the point, keeping the focus on the overarching question allowed the reform effort to proceed without skirmishes over "turf." In striving for an outcomes-based program, the question was not about where students sit in classes but what they can do. The ACE outcomes do not specify disciplines (see Table 1 above); rather, they focus on what students should be able to demonstrate about what they learn. To alleviate concerns about a particular outcome in the ACE program (or lack thereof), remember that the university's general education requirement of ten ACE-certified courses amounts to thirty credit hours. Each college has some flexibility to set some discipline-specific requirements for its majors, and colleges have exercised that discretion.

Second, although UNL's administration mandated reform of the general education program, the reform process was decentralized, making it easier for faculty to "buy in" to the process and participate constructively. So instead of defending "turf" in reaction to campus administration, the reform process was about clarifying how to contribute to student learning. In so doing many units spotted strategic opportunities, for example, to integrate general education within majors or to find new ways to contribute to the university's general education mission.

The third lesson draws from the first two lessons. Keeping the focus on student outcomes also meant focusing on assessment of those outcomes. Throughout the reform process there was a concerted effort to keep assessment of ACE outcomes as decentralized as possible. There is no centralized authority mandating *how* assessment of ACE outcomes shall be conducted. There is a campus-wide oversight body with authority to ensure *that* units are assessing ACE outcomes and acting upon their findings.

A number of colleges and programs were already involved in assessment efforts for accreditation purposes, so they seized the chance to incorporate assessment of general education within their existing assessment procedures. And for units unused to assessment, there was trust that a decentralized approach to assessing ACE outcomes would not necessarily be oppressive, providing freedom to determine how to gauge student achievement of the outcomes.

Finally, and perhaps obviously, it was vital to include perspectives beyond faculty, to engage other key stakeholders. Students, advisers, admissions officers, administrators, and external constituents (especially local community colleges, which provide many transfer students to UNL) were actively engaged throughout the process. Candid input from both principal stakeholders and faculty created an atmosphere of mutual regard, which was vital in crafting the new ACE program.

Limitations

When institutions enact curriculum reform they are likely to be confident that they have created something better than before. Why might UNL suspect that the new ACE program enacted in 2009 represents a meaningful improvement?

Anticipating the need for a program that can evolve, not only can new courses be proposed for ACE certification, once courses are approved they are now evaluated periodically for recertification. Assessment is central to the ACE program, and a campus-wide body (an amalgamation of the campus assessment committee and its undergraduate curriculum committee) has been given two key responsibilities: (1) collect and review the aggregated assessments and samples of student work from the colleges that host ACE-certified courses and (2) develop and communicate a five-year rotation for the assessment of the ten ACE outcomes so that the assessment process is regular, reasonable, and distributed over time.

Until several years of assessment data become available, there are limits to the kinds of conclusions that can be drawn firmly about the new program. Nevertheless, it is instructive to consider UNL's approach to implementing its new program.

Collection of assessment data has commenced. Departments and colleges are in the process of assessing student work designed to help them achieve the learning outcomes. UNL's director of institutional assessment has spearheaded efforts to help faculty and departments develop meaningful, efficient approaches to assessment. Samples of student work and reflections about the collected work can be archived electronically. The university's director of general education (a new position on campus) has developed faculty learning communities based on each of the ten ACE outcomes. These communities encourage discussion across disciplines about the particular learning outcomes.

Going forward, some areas of concern have developed. There is a paucity of seats for the "scholarly product" outcome (Outcome 10), possibly a concern. As students progress through their programs, there is evidence that more departments are proposing to provide these culminating courses for their majors.

Regarding the “citizenship” outcome (Outcome 8), there is not an abundant supply of courses offered, which may be troubling. So far, the outcome relies disproportionately on a tiny number of large-enrollment, dual-certified social science classes. Without greatly altering existing courses, there are efforts under way to capitalize on certain aspects of those courses—perhaps involving “leadership,” “planning,” “policy,” or “professional standards”—to expand the offerings for this ACE outcome. Similarly, there are opportunities for departments to capitalize on “communication,” “diversity,” or “global” aspects of their courses to broaden and deepen the offerings for the ACE program.

Concluding Remarks

Limitations of the new ACE program notwithstanding, UNL’s experience with general education reform is instructive. By focusing on learning outcomes instead of subject areas, the university was able to succeed in reforming its general education program, a goal that has eluded many other institutions. The reform process also illustrates how individual units were able to improve alignment with the university. Departments and colleges capitalized on the chance to simplify the administration of general education. Perhaps more importantly, general education reform provided opportunities for units to demonstrate their strategic importance, thereby enhancing their profile on campus. As time goes by and assessment data become available, we expect that this case study will generate empirical research on the efficacy of UNL’s new general education program.

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14 Scott M. Fuess Jr. and Nancy D. Mitchell

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