

Review team composition:

Kenneth Ruit, UND School of Medicine and Health Sciences
Alexis Hanson, UND Student
Harmon Abrahamson, UND Department of Chemistry
Sebastian Braun, UND Department of American Indian Studies
Matthew Cavalli, UND College of Engineering and Mines
Larry Peterson, NDSU Director of Assessment
Susan Albertine, Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U)

Preamble

The mission, goals, and objectives of the Essential Studies Program (ES) have universally strong support among all of the stakeholders with whom the team met.

Findings

The efforts to plan, design, implement, and assess ES are noteworthy and commendable. What has also been universally recognized is that efforts now need to be directed toward improvement and sustainability for the future.

- **Leadership:** The governance structure of Essential Studies is poorly delineated; the connections that exist among the organizational structures of the institution in overseeing and managing program are not clear to stakeholders. The ES Director percentage of effort and authority are examples of specific leadership considerations that require institutional attention. In addition, Dean and Senate-level involvement in advancing conversations and action is critical for the future of ES.
- **Structure:** Attention to ES design is critical because it is dynamic. Breadth of Knowledge and Special Emphases structures have in some respects introduced barriers to fully appreciating what students are actually learning and their level of proficiency or competency in identified areas.
- **Processes and Procedures:** Efficiency, consistency and transparency were issues of concern that were repeatedly raised, especially in the context of validation and revalidation. The overall effectiveness of processes that, in many respects, are considered in simplest terms as “hoops to jump through” are an overriding concern of the faculty. ES Committee workload balance, committee member and Chair orientation to the work of the committee, and committee experience and continuity i.e., “institutional memory” of committee policy and action, are key considerations in addressing issues of efficiency, consistency and transparency.
- **Communication:** Student and faculty awareness of ES mission, goals, policies and procedures is uneven; while it seems intuitive that orientation may be an opportune time to present ES to students, in reality can be quite ineffective. More strategic and intentional communication throughout the university experience, in content and in manner of communication, is an opportunity that should be embraced. In addition, visibility of the ES Director, especially among Deans is critical. Timeliness of information flowing back and forth to the committee as well as feedback to faculty who have submitted materials are impacted by cumbersome administrative structures.
- **Professional Development:** Recognizing the needs of faculty (contingent and full time) who teach ES courses is critical. Articulating learning outcomes, designing and implementing pedagogies, and assessing outcomes are among the professional skills that need to continue to

be developed and nurtured among faculty in a way that prepares them to most effectively model the behaviors promoted by the goals of ES. Moreover, quite specific ongoing development of ES committee member knowledge and skills is critical; for example, development of committee members not only as peer reviewers but as guides or coaches to faculty who are preparing submissions to the committee would strengthen relationships among faculty peers and enhance the quality of the work of both faculty and the committee.

- **Resources, workload and staffing:** The constitution and percentage of effort of the ES Office must, of necessity, be in alignment with the scope of the ES program at a university the size of UND. In particular, general administrative support within the office as well as technical assistance with records and to support an effective and up-to-date web presence is a clear need. Clarification of the role of the Office of the Registrar and reporting lines in accordance with the administrative portfolio of the AVP providing oversight to ES is also necessary.

Guiding questions with answers

1. How is the Essential Studies program perceived by the different stakeholders who are involved with general education at UND?

As noted earlier, the mission, goals and objectives of Essential Studies (ES) have universally strong support among all of the stakeholders with whom the team met. At the same time, some of the concerns or questions that Dr. Steen asked at the first meeting of the Review Team were echoed by many of the stakeholders the team interviewed:

- Is there too much emphasis on assessment?
- Is there too much emphasis on compliance and perceived “jumping through hoops”?
- Is there a perceived inconsistency in the validation and revalidation process
- Does Essential Studies seem to be only a collection of courses and not a true curriculum?

Two additional common concerns emerged:

- ES can be an obstacle for transfer or off-campus students.
- The ES petition process is frustrating for some students and their advisors.

STUDENTS:

The direct evidence on student perceptions came from a meeting with four high performing, highly engaged (and therefore atypical) students and from 507 non-random student responses to a UND student government poll on May 15, 2014. The four students shared the frustration that they and their friends experienced with ES:

- There are “lots of requirements” and a too “elaborate system of categories.”
(There were similar the comments on the student government poll.)
- The course approval process forces students to take extra courses because faculty will not or cannot get perfectly good courses approved.
- Students have a “check the box” mentality for courses that have no perceived value for them other than the ES requirement.

The broad picture from student government poll is not very positive:

- Do ES courses broaden your education and complement your major?
 - 37% yes
 - 52% no
- Are ES requirements easy to understand and navigate?
 - 34% agree
 - 35% disagree

A subset of 138 students made suggestions for changing the ES program, relatively few of those are positive or provide any evidence of ES goals such as reflection and critical thinking.

The Review Team heard indirect evidence of student perceptions from a set of recommendations prepared by Tom Rand and in the meetings with the ESC chairs, Student Success Center staff, the central advisors, Assessment and Faculty Development leaders, representatives from Honors and Integrated Studies, the Chairs, and staff working with transfer students. Common reports of student concerns were:

- ES can be an obstacle for transfer students, especially because of the volatility of the ES list.
- Some students believe they are forced to take extraneous courses.
- ES is seen as just a collection of courses, with no sense of a program and its meaning.
- ES can be an obstacle for off-campus students and students who pursue a second bachelor's degree if their first one is not from an NDUS institution.
- Online ES courses are too scarce.
- Some students find the petition process frustrating.

Faculty:

The Review Team gained direct evidence of faculty perceptions from an email from one faculty member and in the meetings with the ESC chairs, the representatives from Honors and Integrated Studies, and the open meeting on the course approval process. Common concerns were:

- There seems to be uneven alignment between goals of ES and actual implementation of curriculum because of the lack of professional development for contingent faculty.
- Some faculty see the assessment required for course validation or revalidation as superficial, arbitrary, inconsistent, or opaque.
- The feedback loop for course validation or revalidation takes too long.
- There needs to be greater emphasis in thinking across disciplines.
- More faculty need to model the outcomes they are teaching, such as critical thinking.

Advisors:

The Review Team gathered direct evidence of advisors' perceptions from a set of recommendations developed by Tom Rand and in the meetings with Student Success Center staff, the Central Advisors, and staff working with transfer students. Common concerns were:

- Some advisors still see ES as a checklist to "get out of the way."
- The previous bullets for indirect evidence of student concerns frequently reflect observations from advisors.

Administration:

The Review Team received direct evidence of administrators' perceptions from a set of recommendations prepared by Tom Rand and in meetings with the Provost, the Deans, Assessment and Faculty Development leaders, and the department chairs. Common themes were:

- The level of understanding about ES among the Deans and Chairs varies greatly.
- Deans need more regular communication with ES.
- The assessments required for course validation and re-validation should be less onerous and more meaningful for faculty.
- Some chairs perceive that the bureaucratic burden of ES outweighs its educational benefits.
- ES is thoughtful and promotes more intentional teaching by faculty.
- Students do not experience the developmental, cohesive progression in ES that we would expect to see in a program, rather than just a collection of courses.
- ES can seem disjointed because of the broad menu of choices.

- ES Committee criteria for revalidation are not easily available—expectations need to be clear and explicit.
- The student-experienced reality of some courses does not match the approved outcomes.
- UND is ready to build on the strengths of the present ES and re-think it.
- ES should be one of pillars of UND to attract students and prepare them for long-term personal and professional growth and success.

Recommendations:

Subsequent sections contain specific recommendations addressing the concerns expressed by the stakeholders. Addressing the perceptions of stakeholders will require developing a plan for ongoing, long-term, intentional, and strategic communication with students, faculty, advisors, and administrators.

2. How effective does the Essential Studies Program appear to be in helping students learn?

Overview:

The Essential Studies Program is the program at UND designated to provide a broad-based liberal arts education to all students. By requiring students to meet a series of four “Breadth of Knowledge” learning goals and four special emphases prior to graduation, it allows the university to provide exposure to students in all areas deemed necessary. In general, the requirements cannot all be achieved through course offerings within a student’s academic major. This encourages students to participate in courses outside of their chosen field of study. In addition, the nature of the ES requirements also encourages the students to integrate these more diverse courses throughout their undergraduate college career as opposed to the commonplace mentality of getting all “general education” requirements over with during the first year at college.

Based on all these components and the general concept of the program, Essential Studies certainly would appear to help students to learn. The notion that students receive a well-rounded education with variety both in content area and skill development is very important for a liberal arts institution such as UND. The wide array of participating departments and faculty in teaching various ES courses demonstrates that there is cross-campus collaboration to help students to reach each of the specified goals. The idea that these courses should build upon one another, just as courses in any academic major, is a novel one, and seems generally effective in spreading out ES courses from the student’s first semester to their last. With all that said, there still appears to be a number of discrepancies that stand in the way of achieving these idealized outcomes of the program.

Challenges:

One of the most obvious opportunities for improvement came out of discussion with the academic deans, where it was mentioned on multiple occasions that students are not competent in all necessary areas after graduation. Post-graduation employers have reported dissatisfaction with the education that some UND students receive due to their lack of what employers consider to be “essential” skills. According to these reports, employers feel that they have to teach recent graduates skills that they wouldn’t have anticipated necessary from students of a comprehensive, liberal arts institution. Examples given of lacking skills included critical thinking, communication, and “playing nice with others.”

Another concern brought up to the review team had to do with students not necessarily internalizing the information that they are presented with in their Essential Studies courses. A

number of individuals cited the apparent inconsistency of student's learning and engagement in these courses, which could be a product of a number of different factors. According to the results of a Student Government poll distributed to students this past spring, a majority of respondents (52%) did not feel that their ES courses broadened their education and complemented their major (versus the 37% that answered yes). Considering that students do not feel they have gained a significant benefit from these courses, it is generally congruent with the perceptions of various faculty members.

An overwhelmingly common complaint we heard was that students, along with some faculty and other stakeholders, neither understand nor appreciate the purpose of the Essential Studies program. When speaking directly to a small group of students, including one recent graduate, they were very forthright in their beliefs, and their perceptions of other students' beliefs, that ES is simply a "list of boxes to check off" or "hoops to jump through" before graduating. It was mentioned by more than one of the students that at the time of taking an ES course that they normally would not have enrolled in without the ES requirements, it seemed to be a nuisance and extraneous to the education they were seeking. Reflecting back on their courses, however, they did note that they appreciate the diversity of courses in their undergraduate curriculum. According to the recent graduate at the student session, these courses seemed obtrusive to the courses in her chosen field of study at the time, however, now that she has completed her undergraduate degree, she feels that they were a meaningful addition to her course load and is grateful for the unique opportunities to enroll in classes outside of her major. This is certainly a positive outcome, and a major accomplishment for the ES program, but ideally, we would like students to reach that understanding much earlier in their education.

A final recurring concern brought up by students and faculty alike is that many of the ES courses are lacking in academic rigor. Although we have established that they may bring a sense of variety into a student's course load, it would be far more beneficial to their education if each course challenged the students to exceed the minimum requirements. Students generally feel that courses outside of their academic major especially do not meet the rigor they expected from a college level course, even an introductory one, yet these tend to be some of the courses that fill up every semester. Because students don't yet fully understand the significance of ES courses and their contribution to a well-rounded education, many have little or no interest in excelling in courses that are not directly applicable to their academic major. Although not true across all disciplines, many ES courses are lower level, introductory courses and as such, may be taught by less experienced faculty or even graduate students. This can also impact the rigor of the course and downplay its importance in the student's higher education experience.

Recommendations:

Immediate

- 1) We recommend that UND form a task force composed of students and faculty to explore the learning outcomes of ES. We suggest using LEAP as a framework for this effort. More specifically, we recommend that the outcomes be aligned with both the LEAP Essential Learning Outcomes and discussed with reference to a selection of VALUE rubrics and the learning statements of the Degree Qualifications Profile. This exploration would allow the participants to articulate the desired level of learning in key areas of the curriculum and to situate expectations for learning at UND in the context of nationally respected outcomes. According to AAC&U, many institutions are doing just this.

Within 1-2 Years

- 2) Considering that a recurring issue with graduates is a lack of strong communication skills, it was proposed by multiple individuals that the advanced communication component be

separated from the capstone course. Although this will bring with it a corresponding increase in the number of courses that need to be taught and taken, it may prove to be a step in the right direction if the UND is truly seeking a more rigorous exposure to communication skills. This would result in a three-step process (oral communication, advanced communication, capstone) that would allow for students to have more practice with an intermediate writing stage before proceeding on to their capstone course.

- 3) To combat what was often referred to as “mediocre” classes, courses that are perceived to exist because they are “better than nothing,” the ES program needs to have higher expectations of each course within its program. By weeding out some of the courses that are less effective in producing a well-rounded, capable student, the ES office can ensure that each course listed under its purview is a rigorous and innovative course that truly enhances students’ educations.
- 4) Where appropriate, it would also be wise to grant more lenience to students interested in taking advanced course equivalents receiving ES credit. An institution pushing for a well rounded, yet robust, curriculum should welcome a student’s willingness to put in more work, if already at a place advanced enough to take the upper level courses.

Within 3-5 Years

- 5) Awareness of ES needs to be integrated across UND activities to reinforce the importance of ES goals in all aspects of students’ lives and careers. This may require additional funding for advertising and events and/or coordination with other units (e.g. athletics, student government, etc.).

3. Do the stated goals and mission of the Essential Studies program align with the implementation of the curriculum and instruction?

1. *How well do the course and program offerings in Essential Studies align with the stated program aims and listed requirements?*
2. *How clearly, completely, and effectively is Essential Studies presented to students, faculty and to the public?*

There is no identifiable, specific statement of mission or purpose for UND’s Essential Studies program. Rather, the program’s mission or purpose can be derived from a number of narrative statements on the Essential Studies website (<http://und.edu/academics/essential-studies/>) that introduce the program and address the question “Why are Essential Studies courses important?” As UND’s program in general education and one of the “pillars” of a student’s academic experience (the major being the other “pillar”), the courses that collectively comprise the Essential Studies program help students develop key intellectual skills and competencies that are critical to doing successful work and service. Quoting the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U), UND Essential Studies provides UND undergraduates with “broad knowledge, transferable skills, and a strong sense of values, ethics, and civic engagement.” Essential Studies exists because of the institution’s conviction that citizenship in a complex and changing world demands a breadth of knowledge and a wide range of intellectual skills that will prepare students for a satisfying and effective professional and personal life, and participation in the public life of their community. The mission and goals of Essential Studies have universally strong support among all of the stakeholders with whom the program review team met.

Toward that end, UND has identified four broad learning goals with which each Essential Studies course must align its stated student learning objectives. The four broad goals are:

- *Thinking and Reasoning*: The ability to call on a variety of thinking and reasoning skills and choose among them in order to accomplish a range of civic, professional, and personal tasks is a core hallmark of an educated person. By the time students complete their ES courses, they will have encountered opportunities to practice various kinds of thinking and reasoning skills, including critical thinking, quantitative reasoning, and creative thinking.
- *Communication*: Communicating skillfully involves learning the conventions associated with writing and speaking, and learning to write and speak clearly to diverse audiences.
- *Information Literacy*: Information comes from many different sources, appears in many different formats, and is used for varied purposes. It is important to be able to access information, understand factors that influence its creation and application, and use it effectively and appropriately.
- *Diversity*: Because the United States is becoming a more diverse society in a multicultural world, it is important to understand and appreciate social and cultural differences; given the North Dakota Century Code designation of a special mission for UND in education about American Indian cultures and histories, it is especially appropriate for students to consider courses in that area.

Each of these four broad goals is addressed in three levels of course requirements that collectively are designed to achieve the stated learning outcomes.

On the first level, students must complete at least three (3) credit hours in each of the following *Special Emphasis* areas:

- Advanced Communication (courses designated as 'A')
- Quantitative Reasoning (courses designated as 'Q')
- Global Diversity (courses designated as 'G')
- United States Diversity (courses designated as 'U')

On the second level, students must complete at least nine (9) credit hours in each of the following four *Breadth of Knowledge* areas:

- Communication (must take ENGL 110, ENGL 130; and 3 credits of oral communication)
- Social Sciences (must be taken in a minimum of 2 departments)
- Fine Arts and Humanities (must be taken in a minimum of 2 departments and take a minimum of 3 credits in Fine Arts and 3 credits in Humanities)
- Mathematics, Science and Technology (must be taken in a minimum of 2 departments and must include a 4-credit hour science course with a laboratory)

On the third level, student must complete an Essential Studies *Capstone* (designated as 'C'; 3 credits minimum) experience within three semesters of graduation. Approved Capstone courses are most frequently found within the major, but interdisciplinary Capstones that are designed for any student regardless of major are also available. All students, including transfer students, are required to take an Essential Studies Capstone.

The total number of Essential Studies semester credits on a student's transcript must equal at least 39.

Review of the Essential Studies website *2014 Fall Approved Essential Studies Courses* (<http://und.edu/academics/essential-studies/2014-fall-approved-courses.cfm>) by the Program Review Team revealed a well-organized listing of courses by course number, name and credit load for every course approved to meet each *Breadth of Knowledge* area and *Capstone* requirement. In addition, whether each course also carried a *Special Emphasis* area designation was clearly designated. The full list included nearly 360 courses available to students to meet Essential Studies

requirements; academic advisors interviewed by the program review team confirmed that the number and breadth of courses listed as satisfying each stated Essential Studies requirement is sufficient to provide students reasonable options. The courses are aligned with stated program goals. The most limited number of options among *Breadth of Knowledge* areas were courses in the area of oral communication, although sufficient numbers of sections of public speaking are offered. Most departments now offer *Capstone* experiences, which has facilitated meeting the advanced communication (A) requirement for students.

That said, past members of the Essential Studies Committee who met with the program review team described an “unevenness” in the alignment of curriculum and instruction with Essential Studies goals and objectives. They described a “casualness” in departments when it comes to teaching Essential Studies courses; “ownership” is lacking, especially in courses where graduate assistants, who have very little orientation to Essential Studies, are the primary instructors. New faculty rarely even know that they are teaching an Essential Studies course, so are unaware of expectations for data collection, reporting, etc. Individuals with whom the team met suggested that one could choose any Essential Studies course and they’d wager that the instructor would have a very difficult time articulating its place in the scheme of general education at UND. One department chair shared that he is clear in his expectations of the faculty that the value of the course and the Essential Studies goals it addresses are made consistently explicit to students. Many other chairs don’t take such a firm stance on that expectation and, therefore, do not see that level of communication to students happening in their courses. Deans suggest that Essential Studies looks different on paper compared to how it actually functions.

The Essential Studies website is a principal means of communication about the program and its requirements for students, faculty, staff and the public. The homepage introduces the program and communicates its purpose. Four well-selected photographs each contain links to well-articulated rationales for the four broad Essential Studies goals. Menus on the homepage for *Students*, *Faculty*, *Announcements*, the *Essential Studies Committee*, and *Policies* contain active links to a variety of detailed information relevant to Essential Studies. Users of the website are required to search the menu for the location of Essential Studies course lists – it is found by clicking on the “*Students*” menu. This arrangement may not be the most intuitive for either the student or faculty advisor who is hoping to find direct access to requirements and courses from the Essential Studies homepage. The Guidelines for Essential Studies Course Transfer (GUEST) document is available on the website. Many individuals with whom the team met indicated that it is a useful reference. However, it is dated 2012; since Essential Studies is dynamic in so many respects, revision and updating of GUEST is likely warranted. As of the writing of this report, only the agenda and minutes of the September 24, 2013 meeting were posted to the website for the 2013-14 academic year; no agendas or minutes were available for any of the meetings already held in the current academic year.

Interviews conducted by the program review team with faculty and students demonstrated that awareness of and familiarity with Essential Studies mission, goals, policies and procedures is uneven; while it seems intuitive that orientation may be an opportune time to present ES to students, students indicate that in reality can be quite ineffective. Familiarity with Essential Studies policies is also uneven among faculty who serve as academic advisors to students. More strategic and intentional communication throughout the university experience, in content and in manner of communication, is an opportunity that should be embraced. Increased visibility of the ES Director, especially among Deans would be critical in this regard, as would more consistent and clearly articulated advocacy for Essential Studies from the upper administration, as suggested by faculty with whom the team met. In addition, timeliness of information flowing back and forth to the Essential Studies Committee as well as feedback to faculty who have submitted materials to the

committee are impacted by cumbersome administrative structures. Interviews with student affairs personnel suggested that student affairs or professional advisor representation on the Essential Studies Committee would improve consistency of committee work and enhance communication. Moreover, efficiency, consistency and transparency were issues of concern repeatedly raised, especially in the context of validation and revalidation. The overall effectiveness of processes that, in many respects, are considered in simplest terms as “hoops to jump through” are an overriding concern of the faculty. The program review team received verbal and written input from deans and chairs regarding Essential Studies policies and processes that demonstrated thoughtful and constructive reflection based on experience. Mechanisms to solicit and receive ongoing feedback that could potentially be translated to change/improvement in policy and process should be better institutionalized.

Recommendations:

Immediate

- 1) Develop mechanisms to solicit and receive ongoing feedback that could potentially be translated to change/improvement in policy and process.
- 2) Make a high priority of keeping information on the website up-to-date, accurate, and easy to find.
- 3) The Essential Studies Office (Director and staff) should develop a communication plan. This plan should include provisions for an annual “State of ES” report submitted to the Provost and widely shared with the campus community, especially the Deans. The plan should also include provisions for frequently updating the GUEST document and sharing it with the UND community.

Within 1-2 Years

- 4) Specific mechanisms should be established so that the University Senate (working through the Essential Studies Committee) and the Provost (working through the Essential Studies Director and the Registrar) work together to jointly set policy for the Essential Studies Program.

4. How effective and efficient is the administrative structure for the management of Essential Studies?

1. *ES Office/Director—how is the administrative unit functioning to support ES managerially? (Reports to VPAA)*

The governance structure of Essential Studies is poorly delineated; the connections that exist among the organizational structures of the institution in overseeing and managing program are not clear to stakeholders. The non-voting role of the ES Director on the ES Committee is an example of the unclear lines of reporting the responsibility relative to the ES Program overall. In some cases, a clear delineation of responsibility between the ES Office, the ES Committee and the Registrar’s Office is lacking, resulting in confusion, delay, and frustration for faculty, students, and staff.

The ES Office and Director should exist primarily to a) serve as a central provider of information about the Program and its requirements, b) keep a record of policy established by the ES Committee, c) facilitate communication between the Committee and faculty (for course validations) and the Committee and students (for petitions to waive/substitute requirements), and d) serve as a champion for the program on campus, getting the “big picture” out to students and faculty.

The constitution and percentage of effort of the ES Office must, of necessity, be in alignment with the scope of the ES program at a university the size of UND. In particular, general administrative support within the office as well as technical assistance with records and to support an effective and up-to-date web presence is a clear need. The original proposal from the ES Task Force was for a full-time director (faculty) and a full-time staff person in the ES office. In the opinion of a wide variety of stakeholders, the current part-time arrangements are insufficient for the work that needs to be done.

Some stakeholders see a place for an additional staff person in the ES Office who would serve as an intermediary between advisors and the ES committee. Their job would be to answer questions and make decisions on substitutions that fit defined criteria, deferring borderline cases to full committee review of a petition. (This person needs access to student transcripts). This would cut out half to three-fourths of petitions in the opinion of some stakeholders. (Tom Rand used to do this for the General Education Requirements for a dozen years.) This would replace the current bureaucratic system with personal interactions.

Communication is a concern. Some departments have learned of changes in course status only through the grapevine; the ES Office needs to officially communicate changes promptly. Keep people in the loop. Improve the feedback loop for committee decisions; timeliness and manner of communication currently depends on the particular committee member doing it. Tom Steen has been a good communicator about ES, but the deans claim to have not seen any assessment data. ES needs to provide them with an annual "State of ES" report.

Nationally, general education is the single largest program in which college students enroll, and it is also now regarded by employers as critical to career-long learning and advancement in a globalizing economy. AAC&U's employer surveys find robust results supporting this claim. A weak governance structure for such an important but distributed program will not serve students or the institution well. Strong shared governance and open communication will allow faculty and administration to work together on behalf of this vital program. Please see AAC&U's survey "It Takes More than a Major" at

<https://www.aacu.org/leap/presidentstrust/compact/2013SurveySummary>

2. Units that support ES or work in collaboration with ESO

i. Registrar's Office

Some chairs of the ES Committee believe that one role of the ES Director should be to serve as institutional memory. In the first few years of the ES program, Sharon Bruggeman (Registrar's Office) was the institutional memory. Tom Steen tried to take over that role, but the Registrar said that this is a faculty committee; he got the message to not "overstep" his bounds. The Registrar's Office seems to play an unofficial oversight role separate from those of the ES Committee and the VPAA's office.

The Registrar's Office formerly handled ES Committee secretary duties and kept the official records. (This was based on the old General Education Committee model.) In the past few years, that office has lost two full-time employees, and has asked the ES Office to take over committee duties and website. The ES Office is concerned that record keeping management is next, and the increased staff effort that would involve. Clarification of the role of the Office of the Registrar in providing oversight and support to ES is necessary. Advice from AAC&U, drawn from REVISING GENERAL EDUCATION AND AVOIDING THE POTHOLES (by Gaston

and Gaff) makes the point. The technical side of student record-keeping should support the learning outcomes of the program and work in coordination with academic leadership.

ii. VPAA's office

The ES Director currently reports to the Associate Provost. This arrangement sets up a potential conflict between the necessity for clear, consistent, and effective oversight of the flagship ES program, and the need for faculty and departmental oversight of the curriculum. Specific mechanisms are needed so that faculty governance and academic affairs work together to set policy. Successful redesigns of general education depend on the investment of the Senate or other shared governance body. University of Nebraska—Lincoln is one example. AAC&U has published a number of articles in LIBERAL EDUCATION telling the stories of universities that make such an investment. <https://www.aacu.org/publications-research/periodicals/toward-intentionality-and-transparency-analysis-and-reflection>

Dean and Senate-level involvement in advancing conversations and action is critical for the future of ES. Clarification of the role of the Office of the Registrar and reporting lines in accordance with the administrative portfolio of the AVP providing oversight to ES is also necessary.

iii. Office of Instructional Development

Few direct ties are apparent. This office could be instrumental in improving faculty attitudes toward and facility with assessment, which is an important part of the ES validation process.

iv. University Assessment

The improved attitude toward assessment on campus helps to facilitate the incorporation of assessment activities in ES courses. This should help the Program to determine whether ES courses, and by extension the ES Program, are having the desired effect on student learning. AAC&U recommends that assessment be understood as an integral part of teaching and learning and that faculty lead in work on assessment as fundamentally what they do in classroom and lab.

v. Academic Departments

Responsibility for ensuring sufficient ES course offerings are available in each breadth of knowledge and special emphasis area (for both on-campus and at-a-distance learners) seems to currently fall to individual departments on an ad hoc basis, rather than being coordinated as part of the overall program.

Recommendations:

Immediate

- 5) As is outlined in the section on resources, administrative support for the ES program should be full-time for 12 months. While a full-time Director would be advantageous in some respects, a continued half-time position filled by a faculty member is likely acceptable with increased administrative assistance.
- 6) Add a part-time staff position to the Essential Studies Office to serve as ombudsperson on Essential Studies matters. This person would be empowered to make judgments on routine substitutions and waivers of ES requirements, and to communicate them to affected students and advisors.

- 7) The Essential Studies Office (Director and staff) should develop a communication plan. This plan should include provisions for an annual “State of ES” report submitted to the Provost and widely shared with the campus community, especially the Deans.

Within 1-2 Years

- 8) Clear responsibilities should be delineated. Ideally, if ES wants to be an independent program, it might follow the model of the Graduate School, and the ES director should have similar responsibilities and authority as the Graduate Dean (i.e., be a member of the Academic Cabinet). This would greatly increase communication with other essential units (i.e., colleges, departments, etc.). At a minimum, a clear distinction of responsibilities between the Registrar and Essential Studies should be established.
- 9) Specific mechanisms should be established so that the University Senate (working through the Essential Studies Committee) and the Provost (working through the Essential Studies Director and the Registrar) work together to jointly set policy for the Essential Studies Program.
- 10) If the Essential Studies Office is to assume responsibility for record-keeping from the Registrar’s Office, sufficient resources (staff time and technology) must be allocated to properly execute those duties.

5. How Effective and Efficient is the Essential Studies Governing Body (ES Committee)?

Findings:

The ES program review committee found that the current governing body is perceived by many stakeholders—faculty, advisors, and students—to be neither efficient nor effective. This is mainly as a consequence of workloads for members of the ES committee, especially the committee chair, a lack of a systematic development process, and processes that are seen to be rather cumbersome, without clearly assigned authority over decision making processes. Efficiency issues are especially apparent in communications with faculty and advisors, inconsistencies in the validation and revalidation standards and processes, and the lack of time devoted for governance and policy discussions. All of these issues translate into a committee and program that is less effective than it could or should be.

1. Validation and Revalidation

Validation and revalidation processes currently make up the largest workload for the ES committee. In fact, they seem to take up so much time that the committee has no time or very limited time to devote to policy decisions or discussions about the future directions of the program. The efficiency and effectiveness of the process seems to depend to no small degree on the individuals involved. The committee heard from faculty who have no problems with the process; it also heard from faculty who are extremely upset and discouraged by the process. Those faculty pointed to issues of communication barriers and to perceived inconsistencies in the process. The lack of efficiency and effectiveness in this process has consequences for the whole program. It seems that some departments are very hesitant to validate courses through ES, which is leading to a shortage of courses, or at least a shortage of options, in some areas (the committee repeatedly heard mention of online courses overall, as well as Fine Arts).

The fact that courses are validated and especially revalidated by committee members who do not necessarily have expertise in the subject leads to decisions that are perceived to be made on the

basis of formalities alone, instead of substance. One concern that the committee heard repeatedly is that the revalidation process is basically seen as "jumping through hoops" because it depends mostly on the formal requirements for assessment, not on the whether the substance of the course contributes to an education according to ES goals. This, as one former chair of the ES committee mentioned, can lead to faculty and departments "gaming the system," i.e., validating courses they know do not fulfill the goals, but which will be revalidated as long as the assessment is done according to plan.

The validation and revalidation of individual courses without clearly delineated expectations on what should substantially set these courses apart from non-validated courses creates confusion on parts of students, advisors, and faculty. It is also inefficient because the ES Committee has to focus on the trees and cannot take care of the forest - which renders it ineffective. It seems that, as the HLC Team pointed out, this is also caused by the confusion of academic achievement with ES goals, which renders the validation and revalidation process ineffective.

The communication problems the committee heard of seem to be linked on one hand to the workload of the committee, and on the other to the fact that there seems to be no clear authority over who is in charge and responsible for governance and communication. It seems that responsibilities were assigned primarily according to historical practice; as long-serving members of the committee and long-serving staff members providing administrative support have left, responsibilities have been shifted on an ad-hoc basis, without a systemic feasibility analysis or enough professional development for committee members and staff. Over time, this has led to a loss of institutional memory critical to a program without clear lines of authority and responsibilities, and the efficiency and effectiveness of the committee seems to be impacted by the time invested in clearing up processes and looking for precedence. A new electronic database might help minimize such efforts, but without knowing what to look for, or who is responsible for looking, the best database is useless.

2. Petitions

Issues affecting student petitions seem to be similar to the ones affecting validation and revalidation. Two obstacles to an effective and efficient process stand out: information and consistency. Much of this has to do with the transfer of credits. Advisors, including long-serving advisors, repeatedly seemed misinformed about requirements and solutions to address them. One example of this is the GUEST document, which delineates what courses can be transferred in and count for the fulfillment of ES requirements. This document should be continuously revised to keep pace with ES validations and revalidations. It also seems to be semi-secret; until recently, only specific advisors had access to it, and while it is now available on the web, nobody was informed of this fact because, as a registrar's office representative mentioned, it should not fall into the wrong hands. The effectiveness of any public program is hindered when the documents governing its processes and standards are not publicly available. This semi-secrecy also impacts the effectiveness of the program because it creates a negative perception. In terms of consistency, there seem to be different criteria applied to transfer students than to students who have been at UND from the start. For "breadth of knowledge", any class in a specific field (i.e., Humanities, Social Sciences, etc.) counts, while for the UND campus, only courses that have been specifically validated for the "breadth of knowledge" category count.

Together with the fact that only a few online courses are validated for ES criteria, these factors give rise to petitions when students find out that their peers received different advice, that specific advice depends on the knowledge of their advisors, and that this knowledge differs, and when students believe, sometimes, with good reason, that a course should count for a specific ES

requirement. The petitions, in turn, increase the workload of the ES committee, which could do more important things.

3. *Other*

The effectiveness and efficiency of the ES governing body is also hampered by an organizational structure that, at least in practice, is not clear on who actually leads the ES program. This leads to a lack of official communication, coordination, and information flow between ES and other important units on campus, i.e. colleges and departments. The committee heard that the ES director engages in unofficial, behind-the-scenes communication, but so might others. The fact that all these information flows are not official might give rise to divergent messages being spread and heard; these then need to be cleared up, which generates a lot of unnecessary work.

The ES director explained that he has no formal authority over or within the ES committee, yet it is unclear whether the ES committee has any authority over or within the ES program office. In cases where nobody has clear authority, usually nobody has clear responsibilities. Communication, cooperation, and reform are hampered or rendered impossible.

For example, neither the ES committee nor the ES director seem to have the authority to speak to the curriculum at any level. Yet, the ES program relies on the right number of courses in the right subjects being offered and validated. Without that, it loses its ability to deliver what might be called an Essential Studies "curriculum." A program that depends on other programs to deliver its curriculum yet has no control over it seems to be inefficient and ineffective by definition except in an ideal world. The ES governing body (whether the ES committee or the ES director) has no powers, for example, to prevent a college or a department from pulling all its courses from the ES curriculum, except the powers of persuasion. From some comments the committee heard, this scenario seems to be a reality in some areas, which leads to real shortages of courses available for students, in turn leading to a relative ineffectiveness of the ES program.

Recommendations

Immediate

- 1) The GUEST document should be regularly updated and be made publicly available.
- 2) Clear responsibilities should be delineated. Ideally, if ES wants to be an independent program, it might follow the model of the Graduate School, and the ES director should have similar responsibilities and authority as the graduate dean - this would greatly increase communication with essential other units (i.e., colleges, departments, etc.). The ES Committee should extend direction and oversight over that office.

Within 1-2 Years

- 3) The ES committee should publish clearly defined criteria for ES courses. What should courses include, at a minimum, to be considered as an ES course? What should courses include to count for Breadth of Knowledge, or Special Emphasis criteria? This would increase effectiveness and efficiency because it would reduce the number of petitions, reduce confusion, and improve the perception of the program, as it would make clearly set apart courses that fulfill ES requirements from those that do not. It would also help reduce inconsistencies in validation and revalidation processes.
- 4) If #5 and #6 below are not implemented, at the very least, the ES Committee needs to adopt a faculty manual detailing the policies and standards followed, and invest in professional development. To increase the efficiency and effectiveness of the ES Committee, and help it deal with the workloads encountered, the university should also think about reducing

teaching loads, research requirements, or service expectations for ES Committee members, with clear expectations that ES Committee members improve communication with and mentor faculty who are in the validation and revalidation process.

- 5) To alleviate the workload for the ES Committee regarding petitions, an intermediary position not dissimilar to an ombudsperson should be created. This position should have authority to make decisions on cases, report complex cases back to the committee, and operate under the oversight of the ES Committee.
- 6) The validation and revalidation process should be outsourced from the committee, so that the ES Committee can focus on oversight and policy. AAC&U has found in many successful general education reform plans that the oversight and policy functions—including vision, philosophy, and change—are critical and must be kept separate from the course-approval process and the body that carries out such approvals. Many different structures exist. The separation of functions is key. Gaston and Gaff’s REVISING GENERAL EDUCATION AND AVOIDING THE POTHOLES makes this point.
 - For Breadth of Knowledge, instead of focusing on the specific validation of courses, the criteria used should be exposure (as it already is for transfer students). Courses taught by Humanities departments should count for Humanities, etc., unless a department does not want to have a course counted for specific reasons.
 - For Special Emphasis, course validation and revalidation should be done by experts in the field, under the oversight of the ES Committee. Engineering and Natural Sciences should decide on Q courses, etc., following the specific criteria set by the ES Committee for these courses (see #3 above), and reporting back to the ES Committee. To prevent insular decisions, oversight needs to be established, and perhaps the chair of that subcommittee should be somebody from another area (in the Q example, Theater, for example).

Within 3-5 Years

- 7) Assessment of courses should change from a course-by-course assessment to a general assessment of Essential Studies as a program, perhaps divided into the different areas. Instead of focusing on assessing the achievement of ES goals through an assessment of academic achievement, which is then validated by committee members, ES should shift to an assessment of outcomes as a program. This would shift responsibility and workload from individual faculty on the committee to the ES program and the university. The ES Committee can then make efficient and effective decisions on program direction and policy, rather than spending time deciding on individual courses. Much of the work that AAC&U is now doing through the VALUE project, including the VALUE Multi-State Collaborative, conducts program assessment that is formative rather than summative and rolled up rather than rolled down into individual courses. Numerous assessment models exist. The most valuable insight from AA&U on this topic is this: “Make the move from ‘my course’ to ‘our curriculum.’” See <https://www.aacu.org/value>

6. Does Essential Studies have a resource base – fiscal, human, physical, technological – that is adequate for its current support? And for maintaining and strengthening its quality in the future?

Essential Studies is the foundation of every undergraduate degree granted by the University of North Dakota. As such, it is critical that the ES program be allocated appropriate resources and that these resources be aligned with the ES goals and those of UND. Feedback from across campus

indicates disparities between both the level of resources provided to ES and the manner in which these resources are used.

Current Resources

- ½-time (9 month) ES Director
 - Home department of ES Director currently receives funds to cover equivalent instructional time at adjunct rates – estimated at \$18-20k
- ½-time (9 month) Admin Secretary
 - Original request at time of establishment was for a full-time, 12 month position – the part-time position was intended as a startup arrangement
- Office Space
 - Then VPAA LeBel covered the cost of remodeling to establish the ES office space (estimated to be about \$30k)
 - Square footage is estimated at 325 ft² (outer office) + 225 ft² (Director's office)
- Operating Budget
 - Currently \$7,800 – this is used in support of ES events, travel, and supplies and follows the typical “historical budget model” currently applied to all units across UND

Resource Challenges and Opportunities

A consequence of the ubiquitous nature of ES in UND undergraduate education is that whenever students are taking classes or planning for upcoming semesters, whenever faculty are implementing curriculum modifications, or whenever NDUS curriculum issues are discussed, there is the potential for questions and issues related to ES requirements. Currently, there is a significant void in ES staffing during the summer months. This has resulted in a combination of uncompensated staff effort, response delays, and additional effort for ancillary offices (e.g. Registrar's Office) during the summer months and times during the school year when the half-time ES staff is not in the office. The part-time nature of both the ES Director position and the ES Administrative Secretary during the academic year has, by necessity, lead to a stronger focus on the mechanics of validation and revalidation than on promoting the ES program goals across campus and further integrating ES into UND's Strategic Priorities.

Few historical documents currently exist relative to ES policies and decisions regarding petitions and validations/revalidations. This is due in part to the lack of a policy manual for the ES committee and in part to the structure of the ES Office/ES Committee interaction. The role of Past Chair on the ES committee (then the General Education Committee) was established with the goal of preserving institutional memory. However, this position provides only one additional year of experience. Recent faculty personnel changes have resulted in even the benefit of the knowledge of a Past Chair being absent from some ES discussions. The ES Director, while constant throughout the entire life of ES, is not in a position to direct ES Committee actions as a non-voting ex-officio member.

Validation and revalidation efforts tend to fall heavily on department chairs, particularly in departments with large numbers of ES offerings or when the coordination of multiple sections of ES courses is required. In some cases, there is also an inherent tension between the need for department chairs to staff ES courses (both on-campus and at-a-distance/online) in a cost-efficient manner and the goal of making sure all instructors for ES courses are committed to achieving ES goals. Multiple stakeholders commented on ES courses being taught by graduate students or non-

regular faculty. It currently falls to individual department chairs to ensure these instructors 1) are aware that their course is part of the ES program and 2) understand the link between assessment and ES goals in their course.

UND's potential implementation of a new budget model may mean fewer centralized resources for the ES program and more dependence on individual college resources. To date, the Deans report that they have not had conversations about how ES should be shared, funded, etc. among colleges beyond any policies for tuition division between a student's home college and the college of enrollment. Some Deans report concerns relative to funding the required number of ES sections, particularly of capstones. It is unclear if changes to the budget model will alleviate or exacerbate these concerns.

Recommendations

Immediate

- 1) Administrative support for the ES program should be full-time for 12 months. While a full-time Director would be advantageous in some respects, a continued half-time position filled by a faculty member is likely acceptable with increased administrative assistance.
- 2) UND web team resources specifically dedicated to support of the ES website should be identified.
- 3) Key metrics by which the effectiveness of the ES program should be judged should be identified and publicized. Institutional research data in support of these metrics should be provided on no less than an annual basis.

Within 1-2 Years

- 4) *ImageNow* should be implemented as a method for archiving past ES Committee actions and monitoring workflow during the validation/revalidation process.
- 5) A permanent subcommittee to the ES subcommittee tasked with annual review of the ES-related policies for transfer courses (e.g. GUEST document, GERTA agreement, etc.) consistent with the timing for the updates of the electronic catalog should be established.
- 6) A searchable archive of examples of "best practices" and key requirements relative to validation/revalidation submissions should be created and posted to the ES website.
- 7) Orientation/training materials should be developed by the ES Office for:
 - a. New members of the ES Committee
 - b. Any faculty teaching ES courses for the first time

Within 3-5 Years

- 8) Awareness of ES needs to be integrated across UND activities to reinforce the importance of ES goals in all aspects of students' lives and careers. This may require additional funding for advertising and events and/or coordination with other units (e.g. athletics, student government, etc.).

Conclusion

Through the LEAP States initiative, AAC&U is supporting large-scale efforts to improve the quality of undergraduate education overall—that is, through general education and liberal education integrated throughout the undergraduate experience. The key now is QUALITY. We see in state after state a new concern about demonstrated quality of student learning outcomes as a driver of change at the state level. Individual institutions are beginning to recognize the value of collaboration across inter- and intra-institutional boundaries to achieve higher-quality outcomes.

In the ten LEAP states quality is the big goal, not just degree attainment. In two more states now organizing to join LEAP States, Michigan and Georgia, the same is true. Texas recently joined via LEAP Texas, with the support of the Higher Education Coordinating Board, out of concern for the quality of undergraduate learning. The Japan Association for College and University Education has also asked to join as a global member of LEAP for the same reason—bringing a global perspective to undergraduate education.

UND can be a leader in North Dakota, which is a LEAP State, by understanding how the institution can strengthen general and liberal education. The senior administration should recognize the opportunity to work in partnership with the faculty leadership to achieve a strengthened ES program not just for UND but for the state. Students will thrive in the workplace as a result, and that thriving should be motivational. Investment in major programs and research alone will not achieve the results of a thriving undergraduate program. Investment in ES can improve overall student outcomes and improve the stature and wellbeing of the institution.