Curriculum Revision at North Dakota State University: Getting Started

For over a decade, scholarship on General Education and Assessment has focused on learning outcomes. What knowledge and skills should our graduates have when they complete their baccalaureate degrees? We are excited about the opportunity to introduce such an approach at North Dakota State University. We believe that we can build on our existing strong general and disciplinary education to enhance the quality of our graduates, developing students who have the flexibility to excel in their chosen occupations and as contributing citizens.

A Possible Approach

At North Dakota State University, the process of curriculum review is continuous but uncoordinated. The Academic Affairs Committee approves new courses and new programs. The General Education Committee approves courses submitted for general education that meet one of 11 categories and (every 5 years) reviews approved courses to confirm that students in those courses engage in activities that meet two or more of the student learning outcomes. (The Committee rarely reviews direct evidence on learning outcomes per se, rather faculty describe activities that could promote the learning outcomes.) Program Review assesses departments on a 5-year rotation, but learning outcomes and the curriculum are not necessarily a part of that review. The University Senate Assessment Committee advises on assessment of student learning and reviews (annually) department reports on their progress in assessment.

We believe that it is time to step back and take a more comprehensive view of the undergraduate curriculum with an eye toward a) identifying the knowledge, skills, and abilities that our graduates should have when they leave NDSU, and b) beginning a process of asking whether our curriculum as it stands (including both general education and the major) ensures the desired outcomes. To those ends, we propose a set of steps with associated timelines to initiate a process of curriculum review. Below we lay out the series of initial steps, with strategic people, list “best practices” as we embark on the reform process, and describe a presentation to take to groups of faculty, staff, and students.

Starting the Process

1. Identify meeting schedule for rest of the summer for team
   a. Get a sense of ideal and real General Education of the future at NDSU
   b. Develop a timeline of activities
   c. Meet/involve the General Education Committee
2. Meet with Provost
   a. Report on the AAC&U Institute, good ideas, and best practices
   b. Possible budget
      i. AACU meetings (prioritize possible attendees from GE Task Force)
      ii. Outside speakers
      iii. Release time
      iv. Financial incentives for developing proposals
3. Develop an interview script
   a. What should the ideal graduate from your college know and be able to do?
   b. How would you prioritize the essential learning outcomes from AACU?
   c. Who would you suggest from your college as someone who would like to explore this conversation over the next three-five years?

4. Meet with strategic people
   a. Deans, individually, including library and graduate school
   b. Vice Presidents for Student Affairs and Equity, Diversity, & Global Outreach

5. Meet with President if other meetings are positive

6. Think very carefully about who members of GE Task Force will be and how they will be appointed.
   a. Task Force members: co-chairs (Provost’s representative & someone not already identified with GE); one representative from each academic college (7); plus one representative each from Assessment, Student Affairs, Registrar, the Library, and two students.
   b. Ask for multiple nominations from each college and then screen the nominations together with the Senate Executive Committee before they are appointed by the President.
   c. Meet individually with certain potential members to urge them to put their names forward.
   d. Identify newer people that may have a fresh perspective and ideas for General Education. Involve them in possible subcommittees for the Task Force.

7. Get University Senate Executive Committee to create ad hoc GE Task Force
   a. Contact new Senate President, Mark Meister
   b. First meeting of year (September 2009)

8. Develop Task Force charge and get Task Force appointed (both come from President) (October 1, 2009)

9. Meet with appropriate committees
   Academic Affairs, Program Review, Assessment

10. Meet with other stakeholders
    a. Develop the PowerPoint presentation
    b. Collect data from course info, syllabi, to look at language commonalities, etc.
    c. Present to department chairs
       i. Include accrediting agency requirement discussions
       ii. Include discussion of other stakeholder identified needs & required outcomes
    d. Student Government
    e. Staff Senate

11. Identify what data we need and where to collect it, see what is already available

12. Send selected GE Task Force members to the AACU General Education and Assessment Conference in February 2009.
**Best Practices**

1. Think implementation and assessment from the very beginning
2. Task-force charge should come from the President, be clear, and communicated across campus.
   Should include that there are broader things to think about than just are we offering enough courses. Raise awareness of the issues involved
3. Ensure the support of the President: “Students are Paramount.” (campus theme)
   We expect be up to date with our research peers. Our undergraduate curriculum should be up to date with our peer institutions and best practices at the national level. (Fits with campus theme of “stature.”)
4. Communicate constantly and everywhere (but have a consistent message).
   It’s Happening at State, website, minutes on Blackboard, University Senate, department meetings, Deans (to their chairs/heads), Spectrum (student paper)
5. Resources (political, financial, symbolic) for the task force are crucial.
6. Get everyone on campus thinking about the same questions
7. General Education and the majors must work together.
8. Communicate regularly with other Senate committees: Academic Affairs, Assessment, General Education, Program Review.
9. Get input from the advisory boards to majors and colleges. Ask them to rate the qualities that are important for early success in their field and those that are crucial for the next promotion.
10. Build in approval steps along the way to avoid an all or nothing showdown in the Senate.
11. General Education should be grounded in who our students are, what learning outcomes we want them to have, and what pedagogies are most effective for both of these.
12. Don’t spend time assessing the existing program—faculty will invariably criticize the methods, the sample, etc. Look at the positives about how to do things better. How do we move forward to give people better communication, quantitative skills, etc.?
13. Investigate ways to better integrate the major, General Education, Assessment, and Program Review.
14. Get faculty to buy-in to these processes because they see value in them. They should not be external impositions.
15. Encourage the campus to become a community of reflective practitioners.

**Group Presentation Outline**

1. Overview of current program
   What do students know and what do they think about being in college?
   Do students and faculty see GE as something to “get out of the way”?  
2. NDSU Mission Statement and themes
   “Students are paramount.”
3. What has changed since 1991?
   Both students and NDSU have changed.
   What employers want has changed.
   Technology has changed.
4. Have audience rank the value of essential learning outcomes from AACU. What do we want all NDSU graduates to know and be able to do based on their courses in both GE and the major and their co-curricular experiences? How does the current GE fit with the majors and individual courses? How do the majors and the courses fit with the essential learning outcomes?

5. Have audience rank the value of high impact learning practices. Which of these practices are currently used in the audience members’ majors and individual classes?

6. Have audience rank the value of department activities with regards to GE.

7. Ask what they have learned about students and their programs from their capstone experience or any alumni survey.

8. Ask audience to tell us what NDSU students do well and how do we know that. (small group discussions in each department)