GE Revision Process: Interviews

Interview Concerning Processes for General Education Reform at MSUM

Interview: Ellen Brisch, Chair of Dragon Core Committee
Present: Brisch, Birmingham, and Peterson
Date: June 24, 2008 (3-4 p.m.)

Although we met with Ellen Brisch for nearly an hour, our conversation on MSUM’s move from a liberal studies curriculum to a “Dragon Core” focused on four main areas: the process of revision, the content of the changes, the pitfalls the committee faced, and the benefits of changes to the campus and students. Although these notes will cover all of these areas, because information on the content of the new program is readily available on line, the report emphasizes that area least.

The process:
Ellen shared a good deal of information about the process of the change, including the charge and reason for the change, the make-up and commitment of the committee, achieving community buy-in, funding sources for the changes, and the process of developing a new program.

1. The charge: System changes and streamlining the transfer curriculum were the central reasons for the changes to what was seen by faculty and students as a generally functional and familiar program. A mandate from the president charged the then liberal studies committee with bringing the liberal studies curriculum into line with the system transfer requirements of the MNSCU system. However, the committee had a good deal of latitude in terms of the sorts of changes they would propose within the general transfer guidelines. MNSCU mandated the ten competencies, but the committee tailored the student learning outcomes to meet their vision for general education.

2. The committee: Ellen describes the General Studies committee at her institution as “prestigious" and suggested that she was not chosen for the committee the first time she applied to be a member. Moreover, she suggested that service on university committees is highly valued at her institution, and rewarded in terms of tenure and promotion. This combination created a committee of people who were highly engaged and concerned with liberal studies at the institution. The committee was made up of a dean, an associate dean, some one from the library, ITS, academic affairs/registrar, a community member, a member of the student appeals board, students, and faculty representing each college. An assessment specialist was brought in further into the process. (Brisch thought one of their failings was that that the program was not designed with an assessment specialist sitting at the table.) The 14-member committee met 1-1.5 hours a week for almost a year and a half. Committee members did not get any release time.

3. Achieving buy-in: The committee did several things that assured the success of their proposed program through faculty governance channels. First, President Barden supported them and provided a very specific charge. Second, there were funds available for faculty development (1/2 or one month’s summer salary for developing a new class or revamping an existing one). These courses could not be introductions to the major or large courses. Third, the liberal studies committee provided opportunities for faculty development programming (fall part-day meetings to share ideas and information). Fourth, they held open forums to collect ideas, strategies, and concerns as well as to share information. Finally, committee members visited every department on campus to talk to faculty in small group situations and help them understand the program’s impacts. Ellen suggested that she would encourage others to begin this last point early—that sharing information is a key to calming concerns.

4. Funding source: MNSCU had a funding source of money that had been meant for merit increases that the union had opposed. MSUM applied for some of this money through an IPSEL grant (from the state), but the central point here is that money was required for helping achieve faculty buy-in a support.

5. The process: The group of 14 met weekly for nearly a year and a half. Ellen said the overall concept for the program came early and was based upon shared values, the national literature (especially connecting multiculturalism/critical thinking), and the MNSCU transfer agreement. Of these, the shared value of liberal education seemed especially important.
The Content of Dragon Core:
The best information on the content and structure of the new program is available on the MSUM web site: http://www.mnstate.edu/acadaff/dragoncore/. According to the web site: “The Inner Cluster offers a sampling of introductory courses and provides a base of knowledge—The Foundation Four [oral communication, written communication, numerical literacy, and critical thinking/multiculturalism]. The knowledge acquired in the Foundation Four is applied and extended across disciplines in the Middle Cluster and culminates with integrated application of knowledge in the Outer Cluster.”

Pitfalls or challenges:
The committee charged with implementing a new program faced several challenges, none of which is surprising:

- getting faculty buy-in
- scrambling for turf 1 (not wanting to give up subject areas); for example, one department believed they “owned” ethics and critical thinking as intellectual content
- scrambling for turf 2 (not wanting to give up FTEs, or the scramble to gather up more FTEs); for example, one college attempted to develop more large lecture courses for the “inner” core, though they had not previously offered these courses in that format
- training advisors about the new requirements
- convincing students that the requirements are not that arduous or complex
- integrating assessment is not yet complete

Time has solved most of these challenges; advisors have learned the system, students are more familiar with options, and more faculty are on board following open forums, faculty development days, and opportunities to explore new teaching opportunities. However, Ellen said quite frankly that there are still some tensions, and that assessment of the program is weaker than it could be because the person hired to undertake program assessment was given another, additional job.

Benefits of the new program:
Because this change was mandated by the MNSCU system, the most obvious benefit of the change is that it could be faculty driven—the type of program put in place to meet the system requirements was devised by faculty, rather than imposed as a standard system-wide program.

Ellen suggested that in addition, she and others have grown intellectually as teachers through the changes. There is more interdisciplinary teaching and thinking, and therefore more opportunities to collaborate across disciplines and departments. She added that working in the faculty’s shared governance system was exciting and interesting and she felt faculty developed a greater appreciation for what others did to contribute to students’ overall education.
Interview Concerning Processes for General Education Reform at UND

Interview: Thomas Steen, Director of Essential Studies, and Joan Hawthorne, Assistant Provost
Present: Hawthorne, Steen, Birmingham, and Peterson
Date: August 13, 2008 (11:00 a.m. to 2:00 p.m.)

In order to make these notes as comparable as possible to earlier notes taken from meetings with MSUM and Concordia, these are organized in a similar fashion.

The process:

1. **The charge:** They were strongly pressured to act because of problems about general education assessment in their North Central Association reaccreditation. UND’s President Kupchella had been complaining publicly on the campus that he was unhappy with the existing GE program. Martha Potvin (AS Dean & interim Provost) also pushed them. Why wasn’t the GE committee fulfilling its charge? Their focus and goal was to create a new GE paradigm that was focused on teaching and learning. Their goals were not to overreach, to keep it simple, to make changes that will affect the most students, to promote intentional teaching toward the GE outcomes.

2. **The committee** The Steering Committee grew out of the five person group who went to the AACU GE Workshop in Newport, Rhode Island. UND funded their participation. The members of the Steering Committee were the chairs of GE & Assessment, the Dean of Arts and Sciences (also interim Provost), the part-time assessment coordinator for UND, and Anne Kelsh. The Steering Committee made a plan to review and revise their GE program. When they returned from Rhode Island, they were joined by Joan Hawthorne and Libby (OID). The chair of the existing GEC was on the Steering Committee. After they returned from Rhode Island, they spent one year of planning, two years of the Task Force, and one year of transition.

3. Their Task Force began meeting in summer 2005. The final choice of the Task Force members was made by the Provost from a list suggested by the Steering Committee. The Provost wrote letters asking people to serve on the Task Force and the Steering Committee followed up with telephone calls. Members of the Task Force included the Director of the Library, the Director of International Studies, the Director of First Year Advising, two students, the Graduate Dean, Sally Pyle from the Honor Program, and the Director of Native American Studies. It was a broad array of representation from across campus. They excluded anyone who was difficult to work with. They included departments that had both large and small GE courses. They included both producers and consumers of GE courses. The Task Force was great on suspending disciplinary differences. Sometimes the past chair of the GEC and at least five members of the Task Force were also on the GEC.

4. **Achieving buy-in:** They had twenty-five people on their GE Task Force, which led to lots of campus involvement and a widespread sense of ownership. Perhaps as many as 150 faculty and instructors were involved in some aspect of the process, such as participating in a working subgroup. Many more people came to meetings, etc. They did their best to include the entire campus with lots of involvement. The Task Force had a series of open forums.

5. **Funding source:** The campus paid for the Steering Committee to go the AACU workshop in Rhode Island. Anne Kelsh is now full time in faculty development (OID). She has summer funds to support 6-7 faculty for course development and has dedicated some of those specifically for GE courses. OID also has travel grants for conferences about teaching, a monthly newsletter, and monthly brownbags.

6. **The process:** The Task Force began with a day long retreat. They met every other Friday for two years with small group meetings in between. Task Force members met with 20-25 departments about their concerns about GE early on. They tried to be data-driven in all their presentations, i.e. this is why we know this is a problem. Their focus on student learning was key to their success.
They had the total support of the upper administration. Martha Potvin, as interim Provost and the new Provost Greg Weisenstein were key supporters, showing up at the GE summit in the fall, shaking hands and talking with faculty about GE.

The Provost proposed GE reform should include ethics, but not get support from 2/3 of Task Force. He cites that as a good indication of the process. The President also wanted both a wellness requirement and fewer GE courses. He did not get either one. Ironically, the Task Force did not address any of Kupchella’s issues.

Any proposal before the Task Force had a subgroup that would craft a proposal for it. The Task Force members voted on each aspect in clearly delineated steps: 1) Are we going to study this option? 2) Should we advocate for this proposal? 3) Should it be a goal? 4) Should it be a requirement? 5) Should it have a pre-requisite? At the very end of the process, they had a chance to re-consider any proposal previously rejected. A 2/3 vote was necessary to re-consider, then a new proposal needed to be presented. They had a secret ballot on every vote with three options: yes, no, and further questions.

At the end, they sent the GE proposal out, including the original charge to the Task Force and their schedule of meetings. They presented at the April Senate meeting and then the Task Force members held individual one-on-one meetings with each member of the Senate.

The Content of Essential Studies at UND:
Current information as well as the agendas and minutes from 2002-the present are at:
http://www.und.nodak.edu/dept/registrar/EssentialStudies/escommitteeindex.html

Pitfalls or challenges:
Their biggest challenge or problem was making GE a priority on campus, not the NDUS guidelines. They chose not to fight those because they felt it would take them away from their focus.

Benefits of the new program:
Tom Steen is the new Director of Essential Studies with a half-time position and half-time secretarial support. He hopes to keep the Steering Team intact as an advisory group. Tom is hoping to get a designated GE teaching award. UND’s new Strategic Plan also includes GE elements and the UND Registrar now has a separate listing for all GE courses. They have had break out groups for each of the goals. They may have reading groups on how to teach to and assess the goals.

Assessing the program:
GE courses need to provide direct evidence of student learning tied to the outcomes in order to be validated.

Their assessment process was a real lynchpin for them because they can hold the line and have acceptance of ratcheting up the standards. Courses must first present an assessment plan and then direct evidence of student learning that is keyed to the assessment plan. The reporting unit is the department, but course reports can come from individual faculty, teams, or committees. For example, chemistry gives a standard final exam for all their sections of a particular GE course and they design six of those questions to measure critical thinking. They have a four year rotation by department for GE evaluation. The move to providing direct evidence of student learning took about a year in the GE committee and it has leveraged overall campus work in assessment. Each GE committee member is a liaison for 1-2 departments, working with them, supporting them, coaching them, and asking them questions. Members go to the departments, but the GE committee also holds Revalidation workshops. These are events with panel discussions from departments that have done a good job. These workshops are usually part of a day-long focus on GE that happens once or twice each year. Often they have outside speakers, funded by the Provost and others.