

Executive Summary

General Education Retreat, “Learning for Success in the 21st Century”

Prepared by

Jeff Jablonski, Assistant Director of General Education,
Dave James, Associate Vice Provost for Academic Programs

October 18, 2007

On September 7, 2007, Michael Bowers, Vice Provost for Academic Affairs, hosted an all-day General Education Planning Retreat titled “Learning for Success in the 21st Century.” The retreat was part of the Focus 50-100 planning process initiated by President David Ashley and Executive Vice President and Provost Neal Smatresk.

The purpose of the retreat was to foster a wide-ranging discussion of the following two questions:

- What are the essential learning outcomes for a comprehensive undergraduate education?
- How do we create a campus culture to support these outcomes?

Over 150 stakeholders in general education were invited, including associate deans, college curriculum committees, department chairs, undergraduate curriculum coordinators, graduate curriculum coordinators, Registrar, Student Affairs, Executive Director of Academic Advising, academic advisors, Faculty Senate Executive Committee, Faculty Senate Curriculum Committee, Faculty Senate General Education Committee, General Education Advisory Committee, Libraries, students, and community employers. Of these invitees, 118 people attended all or parts of the retreat.

The retreat was divided into four parts:

1. Presentations by President Ashley, Executive Vice President and Provost Smatresk, and Christopher Hudgins, Interim Dean of Liberal Arts and former chair of the General Education Task Force
2. Session I: A presentation and workshop session titled “Framing the Conversation” by Patricia Iannuzzi, Dean of University Libraries
3. Session II: A workshop on the “Hallmarks of General Education” facilitated by Jeff Jablonski, Assistant Director of General Education
4. Session III: A workshop on “Putting Outcomes into Practice” facilitated by Dave James, Associate Vice Provost for Academic Programs

The presentations from the morning and the plenary discussions from the morning and afternoon were videotaped and available at the following website:

http://generaled.unlv.edu/planning_retreat.html

Presentations by Ashley, Smatresk, and Hudgins

President Ashley recounted his experience developing U.C. Merced's general education curriculum. He reminded participants that as UNLV increases its selectivity, it will have a different student body in five years than it did when the Core was last revised in 2004. Dr. Ashley challenged the participants to think boldly in revolutionary rather than evolutionary terms. He encouraged the participants to think creatively and avoid dwelling on the negative aspects of budget and FTE politics. While these realities would eventually need to be considered, Ashley said, the retreat participants should think more about the capabilities and expectations for students and not about courses or FTEs.

Provost Smatresk spoke about the Spelling's Commission and the growing national concern for accountability. Dr. Smatresk asked participants to think of student learning outcomes as something that "did not live in any one place," but pervaded all levels of education, including individual classrooms, general education, and the majors. He contrasted this "student learning outcomes" approach to curricular design with the traditional model that asked students to take particular courses. The challenge with the new approach is how to assess outcomes in ways that allows for the improvement of curriculum and that does not merely measure basic competencies. Smatresk ended his talk by encouraging participants to be "unafraid to think very, very boldly about what we are going to do. Let's try to plan an educational future for this University that is different than the standard fare that state universities around this country offer. Let's do something unique; let's do something real; let's do something that genuinely helps our students achieve the career goals and the life goals they have."

Dean Hudgins provided a brief history of the general education curriculum and spoke about his experience chairing the General Education Task Force, which brought about the most recent revision to the Core in 2006 as a result of recommendations from the Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities (NWCCU) accreditation review. The NWCCU criticized the old Core because it remained too much of a smorgasbord, that even multiple sections of the same course were too varied, and that there were too many exceptions and exemptions for specific majors. All of these problems resulted in a Core that was not a common experience for all students and was also too difficult to assess. Hudgins explained that one of the stipulations of the revised Core was that it should be no more than 36 credits so that majors with extensive graduation requirements would not be burdened. Hudgins remarked that the short amount of time given to the Task Force made "massive shifts in the culture" difficult to accomplish but that the Task Force outlined many changes for further consideration, including capstone courses and interdisciplinary core sequences in the humanities and sciences. He noted that articulation remains an important issue. Hudgins ended by saying the history of the Core at UNLV has "not been radical by any stretch of the imagination" and that he welcomes "radical thinking" about general education.

Session I: "Framing the Conversation" by Patricia Iannuzzi

Dean Iannuzzi presented on the national context of general education reform, emphasizing that a number of organizations are reaching consensus about the learning outcomes associated with higher education. These organizations include the President's Commission on the Future of Higher Education (Spellings Commission), the Secretary's Commission on Achieving Necessary Skills, the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AACU), the Boyer Commission

on Educating Undergraduates in Research University, and the American College Personnel Association. While each organization emphasizes something different, these shared learning outcomes resemble those of the AAC&U’s Liberal Education and America’s Promise (LEAP) initiative:

- Knowledge of human cultures and the physical and natural world through the study in the sciences and mathematics, social sciences, humanities, histories, languages, and the arts
- Intellectual and practical skills such as intellectual inquiry and analysis, critical and creative thinking, written and oral communication, quantitative literacy, information literacy, and teamwork and problem solving
- Personal and Social Responsibility including civic knowledge and engagement—local and global, intercultural knowledge and competence, and ethical reasoning and action
- Integrative learning, including foundations and skills for lifelong learning

Iannuzzi ended by discussing a learning framework of her own design that depicts the essential supports for higher learning (see Figure 1). The learning outcomes (represented by the roof of the “temple”) are supported by the three inter-connected pillars of faculty, curriculum, and co-curriculum. The foundation of this learning is student engagement. Factors that affect learning include external constituencies, student experiences, faculty attitudes, and more (the clouds). This figure illustrates how higher learning entails more than a loose aggregate of isolated courses. It requires the meaningful integration of faculty, curriculum, and co-curriculum.

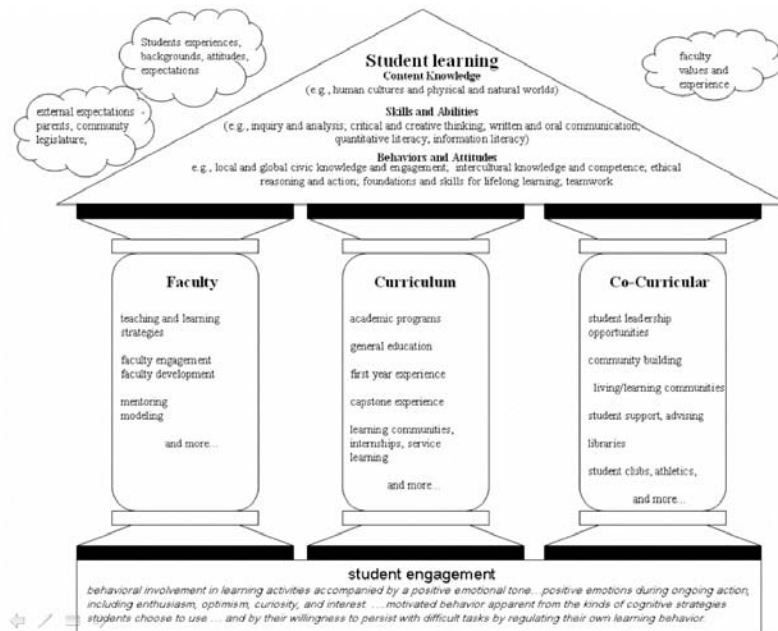


Figure 1. The Temple: A Framework for Higher Education

The presentation was followed by a plenary session where participants, in groups of eight, brainstormed the most important outcomes among those discussed from the presentation. The following list was created from this activity (in no particular order):

1. Function in a democratic society

2. Access, verify, analyze information: information literacy
3. Collect, analyze information, and draw conclusions based on evidence
4. Work in teams
5. Appreciate global diversity
6. Demonstrate knowledge of geopolitical and ecological systems
7. Demonstrate ability to know themselves and what makes them happy
8. Communicate effectively in speech and writing
9. Demonstrate skills in modeling, cognitive, mathematical, and conceptual
10. Evolve with knowledge in one's field
11. Accept responsibility for actions (accountability)
12. Ability to transfer knowledge from academic learning to the job
13. Craft 2D and 3D visuals/images/graphics
14. Understand environmental causes and effects on health and wellness
15. See world in systems terms
16. Integrate technological mindset over discipline and time
17. Demonstrate skills and knowledge of a foreign language
18. Understand history
19. Demonstrate self-knowledge and ability to motivate others
20. Knowledge of music, fine arts, and dance
21. Embrace ambiguity, tolerate the gray, be intellectually flexible and adapt to new situations

Session II: “Hallmarks of General Education”

The second session asked participants, in groups of eight, to focus on a particular outcome related to the morning session and to define the “hallmarks,” or the distinctive characteristics, of that outcome. While it is relatively easy for someone to say a student ought to know “X” or be able to do “Y,” it is more challenging for the person to articulate the characteristics that mark proficiency in any particular outcome. The workshop was thus an exercise in answering the question, “How do we know a student is a critical thinker, an effective communicator, a global citizen, an intentional learner, etc.?” The purpose of this activity was to articulate each outcome in more detail and to model the process of thinking more specifically about particular outcomes. It is this level of curricular planning that generally determines the most suitable pedagogies and the most appropriate assessment methods.

Each group was assigned a topic based on feedback from the morning session. So there would be more than one group focusing on a particular outcome, the topics were arranged into the following categories:

- Critical Thinking
- Communication
- Multicultural/Intercultural/Global Knowledge
- Qualitative/ Quantitative reasoning
- Information Technology Literacy/Research
- Ethics/Civic Engagement
- Breadth of Knowledge: Arts and Humanities/Sciences/Social Sciences
- Intentional Learning/Personal Development

Groups were allowed to narrow or broaden discussion of their topic any way they saw fit. Some groups focused on specific aspects and other groups focused more broadly. In the plenary for this session, outcomes that were discussed included ethical behavior, responsible citizenship, multiculturalism, qualitative and quantitative literacy, personal development/lifelong learning, and computer literacy.

The activity encouraged participants to distinguish between knowledge-, skill-, and behavior-oriented hallmarks. For example, both “multi-cultural/inter-cultural/global” groups managed to integrate the broad topic into a fairly coherent outcome (see Table 1). Both groups emphasized knowledge of history and diversity. Both groups called for the skill to speak another language and emphasized the behavior of respect. Both groups mentioned sustainability or “awareness of one’s place in the world.”

Table 1. Comparison of outcomes from both “multi-cultural/inter-cultural/global” groups	
Group 1	Group 2
<p>Outcome: Students will develop a world view that reflects a general awareness of global society and diverse cultures</p> <p>Knowledge</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Describe the history and geography of western and non-western world and how it has formed cultural perspectives and pre-disposition • List the benefits of working in diverse groups • Describe how various backgrounds of individuals influence perceptions and social inequity • Define tolerance and diversity <p>Skills and Abilities</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Displays curiosities in other cultures • Examines diverse opinions and perspectives • Reads, writes, and speaks in a second language • Student can effectively describe their own culture to others <p>Behavior and attitudes</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Functions effectively in diverse groups • Listens respectfully to diverse views • Is conscious of one’s own place in the world and his/her own impact on the world 	<p>Outcome: The ability to think from a global, national perspective</p> <p>Knowledge</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Understand how U.S. policies and actions affect other countries, cultures, and environment • Understand power relationships – social justice • Understand the historic context of cultural development <p>Skills</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Speaks a second language • Navigates a multicultural society <p>Behaviors</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Respects others’ perspectives • Treats others with dignity and respect • Practices a sustainable lifestyle

Similar results from the other topics will be made available to study groups that will be charged with further articulating goals and outcomes for aspects of the Core being reconsidered.

“Putting Outcomes into Practice” facilitated by Dave James

The final session of the day asked participants to create a list of recommendations for administrators on how to achieve the learning outcomes they had focused on in the previous session. Participants were first asked to use the 3-column framework introduced by Dean Iannuzzi in the morning session (Figure 1) as a worksheet to think through how the outcomes could be achieved in a more integrated fashion, through a combination of faculty, curriculum, and co-curriculum. The aim was to get participants thinking outside the “one course” solution to any particular outcome, assuming that many types of knowledge, skills, and abilities associated with general education are too complex to be taught in just 3-6 credits.

After brainstorming possible integrated approaches, participants were asked to then draw up a list of recommendations for administrators on how to best achieve the desired outcomes. Following the learning framework, participants’ recommendations could have been related to faculty (e.g., “promote the use of problem-based learning”), or related to curriculum (e.g., “require all students to take a course or sequence in...”), or related to co-curriculum (e.g., “students should be encouraged to participate in academic student organizations”). Participants could have also recommended a new student learning outcome or made suggestions related to fostering student engagement.

Several themes emerged, including:

- Emphasize international outcomes, including study abroad and a second language
- Encourage team-teaching and interdisciplinary teaching in Core courses
- Identify ways to better integrate co-curriculum into general education
- Sponsor workshops to allow faculty to integrate various aspects of general education learning into their courses, e.g., quantitative reasoning, diversity, communication
- Reward faculty for teaching general education courses
- Reconsider how Core is more associated with FTE/department turf than central learning for all students
- Implement service learning

Some specific recommendations include:

- Require students to take a semester or summer abroad
- Develop and implement faculty cohort program at Gen Ed/Interdisciplinary level that includes student life and a holistic view of the university experience
- Provide incentives to departments and individuals to collaborate on core courses
- Remove general education courses from departments to avoid FTE turf battles
- Increase interdisciplinary research opportunities related to sustainability issues in local and international context
- Add a foreign language requirement
- Have all general education courses address a common problem in a portion of the course. Have town meetings at the end of year to share results.
- Change workload policy to incorporate in team teaching, and develop reward system to reinforce team teaching

- End the turf wars; make the University Core belong to whole university
- Add communication experts (e.g., graduate assistants) to help evaluate student papers
- Encourage/reward civic involvement
- Have teachers apply to teach general education courses

Retreat Evaluation

Fifty-three (53) evaluation forms were submitted at the end of the retreat. Participants rated their overall satisfaction with the retreat a 3.7 out of 5 possible points. The presentations by Ashley, Smatresk, and Hudgins were the highest rated (3.9), followed by Session I (3.8), Session III (3.6), and Session II (3.5).

Areas of the retreat that were well received included:

- 1) Dean Iannuzzi's presentation
- 2) Small group discussions lead by facilitators
- 3) Many praised the day as engaging and worthwhile and thanked the organizers

In areas to improve, it appeared that

- 1) Some wanted more synthesis in the plenary sessions
- 2) Some wanted more presentations on outside models
- 3) Some wanted more time spent on creating practical curricular recommendations
- 4) Some were confused about the information the groups were asked to develop during the afternoon sessions
- 5) Some wanted better food at lunch and snacks in the afternoon
- 6) Some thought the retreat was too long

Conclusion

The general education retreat was conceived as a day to allow constituents an opportunity to discuss goals for general education. The retreat was envisioned as a brainstorming session where participants would be exposed to current thinking about general education but also given the opportunity to voice their own views. Participants were challenged in the afternoon sessions to define outcomes in more specific ways (Session II) and think creatively about ways to achieve general education outcomes (Session III).

The most common outcomes that emerged from the retreat included the following:

- Global and cultural awareness, including foreign languages, study abroad, and diversity
- Ethics and sustainability as dimensions of responsible citizenship
- Practical skills including critical thinking, communication (spoken, written, and visual), information literacy, quantitative and qualitative skills, team work, leadership, and an ability to model and apply abstract concepts to the “real world”
- Student responsibility, self-awareness, and self-directedness
- Knowledge of history and fine arts

Among the recommendations for administrators, participants were strong advocates for the following:

- Support interdisciplinary and team-teaching in undergraduate general education
- Explore ways to integrate co-curriculum with curriculum in general education
- Structure general education to encourage good teaching and avoid “turf wars”

Participants were encouraged by Ashley and Smatresk to avoid limited thinking. Participants seemed to favor innovative approaches to general education, including a more unified Core experience, interdisciplinary and team-taught courses, and more integration with faculty development, research, and the co-curriculum. Participants were extremely enthusiastic about second languages and study abroad. Participants also expressed a desire for more information on model general education programs, how to teach innovatively, and how to integrate the co-curriculum. Participants wanted more support from administration in terms of incentives to teach general education courses and more support for team and interdisciplinary teaching. Participants also expressed a desire to “separate” general education from limiting FTE politics.

However, as one participant wrote afterwards in an evaluation: “There is no way to avoid the problem of FTE associated with gen. ed. classes. Many departments are built around gen. ed. courses. Furthermore, resource allocation (e.g., GA, GA PTI, operating budget, PTI) seems closely tied to gen. ed. courses. Somehow this reality has to enter into the discussion.” Another participant commented that we need to “learn to think of our university as an education crossroads, a place where our students find direction, less campus-centered, as our students are so much on the move.” Another participant wrote, “This is a very difficult subject and I appreciate the university's efforts....Is the university actually committed to enforcing its standards (unlike much current practice)? To what extent can we address gen. ed. separate from problems resulting from fact that much of our student body are transfer students and transfer students don't mesh well with common experience programs?” All of these comments remind us of some of the vexing “realities” of general education.

The challenge for the university community will be to envision a progressive and innovative Core experience, one that takes into consideration both the national desire to prepare college graduates for the 21st century's information economy and global society, but also that addresses our unique local community and the evolving needs of our increasingly “non-traditional” student population, as well as the risk of department politics stifling innovation.

The next step will be to take the ideas and feedback garnered from the retreat and present it to the university community and the committees most closely associated with general education for further review and study. Working closely with the Faculty Senate, Dave James, the Associate Vice Provost for Academic Programs, will convene study groups to reexamine the Core in light of results of the General Education Retreat, the President and Provost's Focus 50-100 planning process, national scholarship and models, the General Education Task Force's recommendation report, and the current Interim Core.