

**AGREEMENT BETWEEN
THE UNIVERSITY OF NORTHERN IOWA
AND THE HIGHER LEARNING COMMISSION
ON A SPECIAL EMPHASIS SELF-STUDY OPTION
FOR THE COMPREHENSIVE EVALUATION SCHEDULED FOR 2010-2011**

**SPECIAL EMPHASIS ON:
The Foundations of Excellence**

Purpose

The special emphasis self-study is an option made available to accredited, mature institutions that have a recent history of decennial review cycles in conjunction with their comprehensive evaluation visits and with no major interim monitoring. Through this arrangement, an institution seeks Commission authorization to focus study on one or more issues that are critical to significant advancement and improvement in the achievement and realization of its mission and vision. Collaboration between the institution and the Commission staff is essential when a special emphasis focus is contemplated.

Eligibility and Background

Founded in 1876, the University of Northern Iowa (web site: www.uni.edu) has been known for much of its history primarily as a teacher preparation institution. Over the last several decades, the University has evolved into a multi-purpose institution that offers specialized, accredited graduate programs and a wide variety of undergraduate programs. Under the 2005 Carnegie Classification system, the University of Northern Iowa is described as:

Basic Classification	Master's L: Master's Colleges and Universities (larger programs)
Undergraduate Instructional Program	Prof + A&S/SGC: Professions plus arts & sciences, some graduate coexistence
Graduate Instructional Program	Doc/Prof: Doctoral, professional dominant
Enrollment Profile	VHU: Very high undergraduate
Undergraduate Profile	FT4/S/HTI: Full-time four-year, selective, higher transfer-in
Size and Setting	L4/R: Large four-year, primarily residential
Community Engagement	Curricular Engagement and Outreach and Partnerships

The University of Northern Iowa is one of three public universities governed by the Board of Regents, State of Iowa. It was first accredited as a teacher training institution in 1913 and has been continuously accredited as a full-fledged, four-year college since 1930. It was first granted approval to offer undergraduate liberal arts non-teaching degrees in 1961. It was granted approval to offer programs at the Master's level in 1951 and the Doctoral level in 1978. The last comprehensive NCA evaluation took place in 2000-2001, at which time the next comprehensive review was set for 2010-2011, with a monitoring report on UNI's general education program and assessment due in October 2004. That report proved acceptable to the Commission staff. Since

the last comprehensive evaluation, UNI applied for and was granted a new elective Carnegie Classification: Community Engagement: Curricular Engagement and Outreach and Partnerships. UNI's mission is to provide a personalized learning environment, founded on a strong liberal arts curriculum. It is committed to being an intellectually and culturally diverse community. The University focuses both on undergraduate education, and on selected Master's, Doctoral, and other graduate programs. It is characterized by excellence in three areas: teaching and learning; research, scholarship, and creative work; and service. Through its varied endeavors, UNI shares its expertise with, and provides service to, individuals, communities, and organizations throughout the state, the nation, and the world.

The University of Northern Iowa has maintained its long commitment to academic excellence through some very difficult conditions. Due to revenue shortfalls in the state of Iowa in the early 2000s, the Iowa Legislature substantially reduced appropriations to all three of its public universities. Additionally, faculty union mandated salary increases were not funded. The University weathered these challenges relatively well through careful planning and practices across the institution. We are pleased to report that during that time period, the Education Trust cited UNI as having the highest graduation rate among its peer institutions and referred to UNI as a model of effective practice.

In 2005, the Board of Regents, State of Iowa, developed a four-year plan to maintain the excellence of Iowa's public universities in the face of these budget reductions: the Regents Partnership for Transformation and Excellence. In addition, the University of Northern Iowa also engages in a five-year cycle of strategic planning with annual reviews of progress reported to the Board of Regents.

The University of Northern Iowa wishes to further build on its strong commitment to providing high-quality undergraduate education by focusing its self-study on the first-year experience, through participation in the Foundations of Excellence program. The Vice Presidents of Academic Affairs and Educational & Student Services, along with the President and his Cabinet are financially supporting our participation in this process by strategically reallocating funds during tight budgetary times to finance this initiative.

Collaboration and Preliminary Submission

An institutional delegation met with its Commission staff liaison and discussed the special emphasis option during the 2008 Annual Meeting in Chicago.

The institution also submitted a preliminary document that

- provided historical data addressing its founding (i.e., Carnegie classification, accreditation history, source of controlling support, etc.);
- showed the relationship between the identified special emphasis and the institution's mission;
- documented institutional consensus and support for the special emphasis areas chosen;
- provided evidence that the institution has made progress with challenges identified by the team that conducted the last comprehensive evaluation visit or any subsequent on-site visit team;

- provided evidence that the institution has adequate financial resources and a comprehensive planning and budgeting process.

After reviewing this document, the staff liaison signaled his readiness to review a formal submission on which to base an agreement between the institution and the Commission.

Definition of Special Emphasis

The University of Northern Iowa proposes as its special emphasis participation in the Foundations of Excellence program as specified in the Joint Project between the Higher Learning Commission and the Policy Center on the First Year of College. The Foundations of Excellence program provides a comprehensive, guided self-study of the first college year that provides for a systematic assessment of institutional strengths and weaknesses. It is built on nine dimensions which serve as a framework for improving persistence and student learning and provide for an intentional design of the first year.

Participation in the Foundations of Excellence program will enable UNI to achieve the larger goal of developing benchmarks for student learning in the first year that will guide institutional decisions and actions throughout the college experience. Additionally, the self-study assures that UNI will consider learning outcomes in the broader context of institutional improvement. This process will contribute to the assessment and alignment of our institutional mission, goals, and intended outcomes.

The special emphasis will focus on the question “**How can we improve the experience of our first year students?**” Some of the specific questions to which UNI seeks answers are:

- What are appropriate and realistic goals for retention, and what are other indicators of success of the first-year experience? What additional data should be collected?
- How do we maintain our historical emphasis on a coherent general education curriculum as we serve more transfer and commuting students?
- Can and should the strategy of learning communities be applied to our main campus? To our off-campus degree site? Should we consider other changes in course scheduling?
- Does the present method of faculty assignment to first-year courses fit our enrollment?
- Are organizational and infrastructure changes needed to strengthen the first-year experience?
- Do we approach the first year in ways that are intentional and based on a philosophy/rationale of the first year that informs relevant institutional policies and practices.
- Do we create organizational structures and policies that provide a comprehensive, integrated, and coordinated approach to the first year.
- Do we deliver intentional curricular and co-curricular learning experiences that engage students in order to develop knowledge, skills, attitudes, and behaviors consistent with the desired outcomes of higher education and the institution’s philosophy and mission.

- Do we make the first college year a high priority for the faculty.
- Do we facilitate appropriate student transitions through policies and practices that are intentional and aligned with institutional mission.
- Do we serve all first-year students according to their varied needs.
- Do we ensure that all first-year students experience diverse ideas, worldviews, and cultures as a means of enhancing their learning and preparing them to become members of pluralistic communities.
- Do we promote student understanding of the various roles and purposes of higher education, both for the individual and society.
- Do we conduct assessment and maintain associations with other institutions and relevant professional organizations in order to achieve ongoing first-year improvement.

UNI desires to devote a portion of its current self-study to these and related questions. It also desires consultation and advice from the Higher Learning Commission Consultant Evaluators on these questions through the special emphasis portion of its accreditation review.

Outline Format for Self-study

An outline of our institutional self-study is attached. Briefly, the self-study will consist of three large sections. The first section will have two preliminary chapters providing an overview of the institution and its response to concerns raised during the last review. The second section will include a chapter for each of the nine Foundations of Excellence Dimensions. The third section will have five chapters addressing the five new criteria for accreditation. The final section of our self-study will include conclusions.

The general time line for the self-study began with meetings during the Fall 2007 semester to discuss participation in the Foundations of Excellence program.

Fall 2007	Meetings held with Academic Affairs and Educational & Student Services to discuss participation in the FoE program.
January 30, 2008	Conference call with Dr. John Gardner, Director of the FoE.
February 6, 2008	University Council meeting to discuss Reaccreditation and FoE.
February 14, 2008	HLC Steering Committee convened to begin self-study process. Accreditation Web site launched.
February 22, 2008	UNI formally admitted to the FoE program.
March 5, 2008	Town Hall Meeting to discuss Reaccreditation and FoE.
April 7, 2008	Conference call with Dr. John Gardner, Director of the FoE.

April 12-15, 2008	HLC Steering Committee members attend HLC Annual Meeting.
Spring 2008	HLC Steering Committee meets to plan self-study process and organization of subcommittees.
May 2008	HLC Criteria Subcommittees appointed.
May 2008-April 2009	Subcommittees collect, analyze, and interpret data and draft reports.
July 31-August 1, 2008	Team attends FoE Launch Meeting.
August 2008	FoE Dimension Subcommittees appointed.
Fall 2008	HLC Liaison visits campus.
September 2008	FoE Task Force convened and Current Practices Inventory initiated.
October 2008	FoE faculty/staff surveys administered.
October 31, 2008	All subcommittee work plans due to steering committee.
November 2008	FoE first-year student survey administered.
November 2008-May 2009	FoE Task Force analyzes data and develops draft reports and strategic action plan.
February 6, 2009	Team attends FoE Winter Meeting.
April 2009	HLC Steering Committee members attend HLC Annual Meeting.
May 1, 2009	Draft reports from all subcommittees due to HLC Steering Committee.
May-August 2009	FoE Strategic Action Plan refined.
Fall 2009	HLC Liaison visits campus.
September 2009	FoE Strategic Action Plan initiated.
November 1, 2009	Final reports from subcommittees due to HLC Steering Committee.
November 2009-February 2010	Draft self-study based on subcommittee reports.
March-April 2010	Campus input regarding self-study draft.
May-September 2010	Self-Study refined based on campus input.
April 2010	Steering Committee members attend HLC Annual Meeting.
October-December 2010	Self-study print and Web production including Annual Report on the progress in implementing the Foundations of Excellence Strategic Action Plan.
January 2011	Distribution of self-study to HLC review team.
February-April 2011	HLC review team visits campus.
August 2011	Convene Steering Committee to develop program plan to address the recommendations from the self-study and the HLC review team.
February-April 2012	Annual Report on the progress in implementing the FoE Strategic Action Plan.
February-April 2013	Annual Report on the progress in implementing the FoE Strategic Action Plan.

Institutional Capacity and Commitment to Special Emphasis

In selecting this special emphasis area, the institution has elicited feedback from a broad range of stakeholders, through a town hall meeting on accreditation and the Foundations of Excellence program and discussion at the University Council, which represents the leadership of all colleges, departments, and administrative units within the University. This has initiated extensive discussion both within and across the academic and student affairs divisions. The project has garnered wide support from campus constituents, which is best illustrated through the strong desire of the President, Provost, and the University Cabinet to participate in this process. The self-study will be guided by a steering committee that will serve as coordinators for the self-study subcommittees identifying the information and data needed to address the self-study components. The accreditation self-study steering committee, the special emphasis subcommittees, and the President and Provost all support a thorough examination of the topic. Sufficient funds have been allocated to conduct this special emphasis and support the work of the steering committee. Thus, UNI has the capacity and commitment to support the special emphasis initiative.

The findings will form a section of the self-study report, which will be available to the campus community and to the public as well as submitted to the Higher Learning Commission. It is understood that the evaluation will be based on this portion of the self-study as well as the sections on the criteria for accreditation. Furthermore, UNI is committed to publicly reporting the findings and recommendations of the HLC and to work with the HLC in the follow-up to the report (including a later consultative visit) and recommendations.

Summary of Agreement

The University of Northern Iowa agrees to completion of the special emphasis self-study under the terms set forth above, which are listed in summary form below.

- defined need for and nature of the special emphasis self-study focus;
- use of outline format for the self-study that indicates how continued fulfillment of the *Criteria for Accreditation* will be addressed;
- statement of institution's capacity to support the *special emphasis* initiative;
- statement of institution's commitment to report the comprehensive results of the special emphasis as a part of the self-study and to being evaluated, in part, on the conduct of the outcomes achieved through the special emphasis;
- commitment to provide the Commission with follow-up, generally through a later consultative visit, on the recommendations (internal and external) and utilization of the findings resulting from the self-study and evaluation processes.

Upon execution of this agreement, Commission staff works with institutional representatives in organizing the special emphasis self-study, selecting team members, arranging the on-site visit, following the review process to completion, and monitoring institution/Commission follow-up.

The Consultant-Evaluators Team conducts the comprehensive evaluation visit to (a) determine the institution's fulfillment of the *Criteria for Accreditation*, and evaluate the special emphasis initiative under the agreed upon format and (b) provide consultative advice regarding the outcomes achieved and, under special conditions, participate in follow-up activities as may have been proposed as a part of the special emphasis focus.

Benjamin J. Allen, President

Date

Special Emphasis request accepted by the Higher Learning Commission.

Steven D. Crow, Executive Director

Date

Enclosure

DRAFT