

HLC QIP Proposal

Broad Goals for a Revision of the Liberal Arts Core (LAC)

University of Northern Iowa

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Purpose/Desired Impact

The UNI Liberal Arts Core (LAC) is meant to impact every UNI undergraduate student in ways broader than is possible in their major. Through it, we strive to provide our students with the knowledge and skills they will need to become citizens in a diverse, complex world. And yet, little has changed within the LAC for several decades. While program offerings and pedagogies have adapted based on the changing educational climate, there has been little to no substantive change in the LAC over the years. While most faculty and students agree that the LAC needs to be changed and updated, there is not a process in place that allows this institution to accomplish that goal. The purpose of the current proposal is to create a process that will lead to a complete restructuring of UNI's general education curriculum. This is a project that will impact every single unit on campus, from admissions and residence life to advising and all academic units. The intended result of this project is to create a concrete plan, along with a time line, for a complete overhaul of the current LAC at UNI.

Significance/Relevance

The Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) states that a 21st century liberal education consists of "learning that empowers individuals and prepares them to deal with complexity, diversity, and change," "providing students with broad knowledge of the wider world as well as in-depth study in a specific area of interest." It is one that "helps students develop a sense of social responsibility, as well as strong and transferable intellectual and practical skills such as communication, analytical and problem-solving skills, and a demonstrated ability to apply knowledge and skills in real-world settings." While the current LAC can provide a portion of these 21st century skills, it does not do so in the most efficient manner for students. In its existing form, students at UNI must choose classes from structured LAC categories that often pit different disciplines against each other in less than productive ways. While this does expose students to a wide variety of degree pathways and encourage students to explore different subjects, it also restricts learning to academic silos and presents students with a compartmentalized rather than integrated curriculum. Some would argue, then, that the existing LAC is not the best use of the core university curriculum and mission.

Summary of Project

Using the UNI Living Learning Community (LLC) Action Plan that was created in 2014 as a model, the goal of the new LAC revision process is to create a multi-year plan to support an intentional integrative and transformational experience that is student-centered, faculty-led, and administratively-supported. The current proposal will inform a three-year process involving all faculty, staff and students at UNI. The process will be highlighted by a university-wide

discussion about the nature and the goals of the new LAC. This will include an extensive review of literature on general education models and an analysis of existing models that are considered best practices for an institution like UNI. Supporting the goals of the UNI Academic Master Plan, this dialogue will include a thorough conversation regarding the knowledge, skills and experiences that every UNI student should demonstrate before they graduate from this institution. The project will seek feedback from all faculty on the core concepts needed to accomplish this goal. The process must include multiple data points, including employment data that reflects both placement and employer feedback. This process could be modelled off of the Foundations of Excellence effort, becoming the first project since the 2009-10 initiative to create a campus-wide examination of a critical component of the university: this time the LAC. Allowing everyone to have a voice in the conversation using this approach will ensure that all university stakeholders have input on this new model. While the actual revision of the LAC will take place at the completion of this cycle, the process will create the basis for the revision. A well designed process is also needed to ensure faculty buy in to the result.

The new LAC model will focus on university wide engagement with an emphasis on foundational areas such as communication, math and writing, but also emphasize the development and evolution of those skills throughout the four-year experience. The new LAC will encourage writing across disciplines, thus providing multiple opportunities for writing development across a variety of subject areas. The model will focus on diversity through curriculum, as well as experiences such as study abroad and community involvement. The goal is not just professional readiness, though that is an important component. Rather, we seek to prepare students to be well rounded, engaged citizens. For this reason, engagement both within and outside of a student's major will be at the center of the new LAC model. With an emphasis on development and growth, all undergraduate students will have multiple engagement opportunities within the LAC.

Using the “moving in, moving through, moving on” framework of the LLC model, the new LAC model will progress through the senior year. This model will focus on problem-centered learning around real-world issues, which engage higher-order learning skills (i.e., analysis, synthesis, evaluation, application) – focused on intentional experiences related to research, community-based learning, experiential learning, or short-term travel (adapted from Kinzie, 2014, “Connecting Learning Communities and High-Impact Practices to Enhance Student Learning”). This LLC approach to the LAC model will provide new touch points for transfer, returning students and students coming in as freshmen with college credit to tap into the “moving through” phase. All students will take higher level courses outside of their major (thus protecting the interdisciplinary vision of the LAC) as well as see that intentional engagement in research, internships/co-ops, experiential learning and volunteerism activities are integral to the LAC and student development. This approach will have a strong overlap with the current Academic Master Plan, linking to the broad goals outlined in the plan.

Project Timeline

Year 1: Full development of the proposal to examine the process for an LAC revision.

Year 2: Data phase: The Provost will make available the full resources of the HLC QIP to established working groups with broad campus reach which could collect and analyze data related to various aspects of the LAC. The charge of each working group developed in Year 1.

Year 3: Development of the process to implement a new LAC model. Faculty in college senates should lead the process with the support of the Faculty Senate.

This QIP is an opportunity for the Provost to enable and encourage the current faculty governance structure (Faculty senate, college senates, LACC) to move forward with substantial change to the LAC.

This proposal was prepared by the QIP LAC Subcommittee:

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Substantial segments were borrowed from the following proposals:

Proposal #8: A Liberal Arts Core for the 21st Century

Proposal #11: The Local, Global and Diversity (GLAD) Core

Proposal #12: Creating A New LAC

UNI LLC Action Plan (2014)