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Preface

The PLUS Task Force is pleased to present a draft report of Progressing Learning in Undergraduate Studies for public comment. This report describes an enhanced program of Baccalaureate studies at Northern Illinois University—one of advancement and distinction that will help set NIU apart as a twenty-first century institution of higher education.

Beginning with the Provost’s charter in January 2013, the PLUS Task Force has spent 21 months exploring pedagogical aims, instructional quality, and curricular practices that integrate major studies, General Education, and high impact practices.

The Task Force has steadfastly reached out to students, faculty, administrators, alumni, and community college partners to discover our best institutional practices and develop a shared purpose for the future. We have worked hard to set ourselves above the specific interests of individual faculty, departments, and disciplines.

We have had the opportunity to observe and collaborate with a number of ongoing NIU initiatives in Baccalaureate teaching and learning. We believe that NIU is making great progress in revitalizing the undergraduate experience. We have undertaken our work in a spirit of partnership with these parallel enterprises, and we hope that this proposal brings all of this good work into proper focus.

We have also worked toward transforming the menu-driven sprawl of our General Education breadth requirements into a flexible and sustainable program that accommodates both native and transfer students, and infusing meaning into a curriculum that students describe as “disconnected” and “pointless.”

While still acknowledging NIU’s commitment to the Illinois Articulation Initiative, our philosophy has instead focused on creating structured “pathways” of interdisciplinary course bundles that are centered upon timely intellectual issues, pathways that culminate in an earned General Education PLUS minor and segue into the major areas of study. We believe that the purpose of General Education is not to attract students into a discipline, but rather infuse disciplines into the lives of students.

The sum of this work is an integrated Baccalaureate program that offers a blend of academic, critical-thinking, and technical skills so that students are flexible and nimble enough to be able to thrive in a twenty-first century economy where many future jobs have not even been created yet. It is critical that NIU graduates depart as lifelong learners—prepared as citizens for both the challenges and the marvels of the future.

Michael Kolb, Chair
September 23, 2014
Executive Summary

Progressive Learning in Undergraduate Studies (PLUS) at NIU comprises a course curriculum and academic experiences that together create an integrated learning environment, connect students to their peers across campus, and encourage cross-disciplinary thinking and intellectual advancement. The specific curricular objectives of PLUS are to (1) operationalize the baccalaureate goals and student learning outcomes (SLOs); (2) increase student participation in the high impact practices; and (3) revise the General Education program to make it more attractive and relevant to students, improve cross-disciplinary integration and increase curricular flexibility.

Major Findings

Attracting New Students

1. The added-value of the Progressive Learning in Undergraduate Studies (PLUS) undergraduate curriculum holds the potential to recruit new students to NIU and thereby address NIU’s enrollment, retention, and graduation rates.
2. The yearly PLUS expenditures would be offset by attracting 70 new students who would contribute to tuition and housing revenue, AND/OR by the new revenue generated from the increase in one-credit sections of UNIV 101 and UNIV 201 and the new course UNIV 301.
3. These 70 new students represent only 0.3% of the approximately 2500 students admitted to NIU but who instead choose to attend other institutions.

Signature NIU Program

4. Based upon comparisons of undergraduate curricula nation-wide, PLUS uniquely combines traditional liberal studies, bold cutting-edge thematic pathways, and high impact practices to create a dynamic, 21st century baccalaureate model.
5. PLUS offers a flexible, integrated baccalaureate experience that makes General Education more relevant to major studies, enhances writing across the curriculum, and provides a mechanism to document co-curricular achievements on student transcripts.
6. PLUS elevates the role of the writing center and its resources so that it may provide robust support for PLUS enhanced writing and adequate assistance for students, staff, and faculty across the university.
7. Student responses in surveys, focus groups, and questionnaires overwhelmingly support
the implementation of the PLUS General Education pathways focus and minor, enhanced writing opportunities, and the transcript documentation of co-curricular achievements.

8. Community college visits indicate that PLUS would set NIU apart from other Illinois four-year institutions and be attractive to and flexible for transfer students.

9. PLUS was presented at the 2014 American General and Liberal Studies conference in Atlanta. In addition to comments at the conference such as “very impressive,” “brilliant,” and “timely;” the AGLS Executive Council noted that “PLUS is on the top of our list” for inclusion on its new website that will “tell the story of emerging and in-progress GE programs.”

Community Momentum

10. PLUS represents the culmination of a seven-year initiative to reform NIU’s baccalaureate experience (from the 2007 strategic plan to the development of the final PLUS program in 2014).

11. PLUS grew out of careful deliberation of over 3500 pieces of feedback from students, faculty, administrators, employers, parents, alumni, and community college partners.

12. Campus momentum in anticipation for PLUS implementation is growing daily; faculty, colleges, schools, and departments are actively revising their current curricula to contribute to the forthcoming PLUS program.

Curricular Changes

The PLUS curriculum changes include the adoption of six high impact practices recommended for enhancing the baccalaureate program:

1. A new requirement of two upper-division courses (a minimum of six credit hours) officially certified as being “writing-infused,” taken either in the General Education program or in the major studies;

2. One lower-division “first-year experience” course (one credit hour) that should be taken in the first semester at NIU;

3. One upper-division “career success” course (one credit hour) to be taken near degree completion;

4. Transcript documentation of tagged engaged experiences categorized as either:
   a. A credit-bearing course that is certified as having an engaged learning component; or
   b. A co-curricular engaged learning experience (captured as a zero-credit-hour course);

5. The infusion of collaborative learning opportunities throughout the baccalaureate program;

6. The adoption of ePortfolio practices to facilitate student learning and reflection.

Five curricular changes are recommended to revitalize the General Education program:

1. A reduction in the minimum required credit hours from 39 to 33 (13 to 11 courses).

2. A reorganization of existing General Education courses into four study areas:
   a. Foundational Studies (4 courses);
   b. Knowledge Domain Studies in Creativity & Critical Analysis (2 courses);
   c. Knowledge Domain Studies in Nature & Technology (2 courses);
   d. Knowledge Domain Studies in Society & Culture (2 courses);
   e. One elective from any one of the three Knowledge Domains (1 course).
3. The grouping of lower- and upper-division Knowledge Domain courses into themed Pathways of study that offer optional transcript documentation of a three-course focus and a six-course minor within a single Pathway.

4. The required minimum of 21 semester hours in Knowledge Domain studies cannot include more than two courses in any one department. (A course with an affiliated laboratory experience shall be counted as single course.)

5. A maximum of two courses in the major department may be used to fulfill Knowledge Domain requirements as long as they are approved General Education courses.

To measure student progress toward, and achievement of, the SLOs, an integrated assessment strategy shall be instituted to collect data from courses across the baccalaureate curriculum.

Increased curricular flexibility may be accomplished by reducing General Education credit-hours, allowing two major degree courses to satisfy certain General Education requirements, expanding the number of General Education course offerings by including upper division courses within pathways, and simplifying the transfer articulation process. New requirements include writing-infused courses, a first-year experience, and a career success course. Most, if not all, of these requirements may be satisfied in the General Education or major studies programs.
1. Progressive Learning in Undergraduate Studies

Progressive Learning in Undergraduate Studies (PLUS) at NIU comprises a course curriculum and academic experiences that create an integrated learning environment, connects students to their peers across campus, and encourages cross-disciplinary thinking and intellectual advancement.

The goal of PLUS is produce baccalaureate graduates who are **resourceful**, **interactional**, and **nimble**. Such graduates will possess the intellectual flexibility and adaptability necessary to integrate varied sources of information in a professional world that requires repeatedly changes in jobs, companies, fields, and careers.

The three specific curricular objectives of PLUS are to:

- put the baccalaureate goals and student learning outcomes (SLOs) into practice;
- increase student participation in the high impact practices of intensive writing, collaborative learning, first-year experience, and engaged learning activities; and
- revise the General Education program in order to make it more attractive and relevant to students, to improve cross-disciplinary integration, and to increase curricular flexibility.
1.1. Baccalaureate Student Learning Outcomes

The endorsed and approved student learning outcomes based on the three baccalaureate goals (see Section 2.2) best articulate what an NIU graduate should know, value, and be able to do, and therefore are fundamental to the PLUS integrative learning approach. This report recommends that:

- every course explicitly develops student progress in one or two primary SLOs other than critical thinking; and
- a unified strategy be implemented for assessing these baccalaureate outcomes at multiple levels (student, degree program, college, and General Education).

1.2. High Impact Practices

Input from faculty, students, and other stakeholders indicated that the high impact practices of intensive writing, first-year experience, and engaged learning activities are high priorities. Employers place a particularly high value on writing skills and collaborative learning. In addition, national studies have shown that good writing instruction, extensive writing experience and high impact practices correlate strongly with overall academic success of students. This report recommends:

- ensuring that enhanced writing courses are taken throughout the baccalaureate experience;
- employing additional high impact activities that include a first-year experience, a career success course, engaged learning activities infused into course instruction, collaborative learning, and the use of an electronic portfolio (ePortfolio) for documenting student achievement of the SLOs.

1.3. General Education Revision

Data and surveys indicate that NIU’s existing General Education program is not meaningful to students. The program does not allow enough flexibility when changing majors or selecting electives. It scored a “D” on a 2014 national survey of core requirements. Furthermore, General Education is experiencing a much higher drop in course enrollments (27%) over the last decade than the overall drop in undergraduate enrollment (16%). This report recommends:

- reorganizing and expanding the General Education course offerings;
- allowing some General Education courses to also count as major study requirements;
- creating “Pathways” within the General Education program in which students have the option to study coherent themes and big questions from multiple perspectives and earn a three-course focus or six-course minor; and
- continuing to support the Illinois Articulation Initiative General Education Core Curriculum.

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1 Job Outlook 2013, National Association of Colleges and Employers.


4 See Appendix A regarding outreach and surveys. Also see the PLUS web site: www.niu.edu/plus.

2. Baccalaureate Program (revised)

Progressive Learning in Undergraduate Studies

09.23.2014

Baccalaureate High Impact Practices

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Writing-Infused</th>
<th>First-year Experience</th>
<th>Career Success</th>
<th>Collaborative Learning</th>
<th>Engaged Learning</th>
<th>ePortfolio</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Two certified upper-division courses</td>
<td>Lower-division UNIV 101/105/201</td>
<td>Upper-division 1 hour</td>
<td>Create opportunities for students</td>
<td>Credentialize experiences</td>
<td>Documents achievement of the SLOs</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

General Education—a minimum of 33 credit hours (11 courses)

Foundational Studies

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Quantitative Literacy</th>
<th>Oral Communication</th>
<th>100-level Rhetoric &amp; Composition</th>
<th>200-level Writing in the Domains</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>3 hours</td>
<td>3 hours</td>
<td>3 hours</td>
<td>3 hours</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Knowledge Domain Studies

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Creativity &amp; Critical Analysis</th>
<th>Nature &amp; Technology</th>
<th>Society &amp; Culture</th>
<th>Elective in one of the three Knowledge Domains</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>6 hours</td>
<td>6 hours</td>
<td>6 hours</td>
<td>3 hours</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Pathways

The seven-course Knowledge Domain requirement may be satisfied through Pathway courses.

A pathway is a body of course work drawn from all three Knowledge Domains that examines a theme from different disciplinary perspectives.

Courses in a pathway coalesce around a set of large questions central to the pathway theme.

Pathways lead to transcript documentation:

A Pathway Focus may be earned by taking three courses from a single Pathway, one course from each Knowledge Domain.

A Pathway Minor may be earned by taking six courses from a single Pathway, one lower-division course from each Knowledge Domain, plus three upper-division courses from at least two Knowledge Domains.

Figure 2. The recommended curricular changes for Progressive Learning in Undergraduate Studies.
2.1. **Purpose/Mission**

The baccalaureate purpose/mission statement shall be changed to:

The baccalaureate experience at Northern Illinois University challenges students to think critically, create, and communicate by participating in a progressive, engaged learning environment. Major area studies, General Education, and co-curricular experiences prepare students to become productive members of a culturally diverse society, and lifelong learners ready to meet the challenges of a dynamic career.

2.2. **Goal definitions—The “Three Cs”**

The baccalaureate goals shall remain the same except for the replacement of the word “basic” with the word *foundational* in the Communication goal. The baccalaureate goals shall now read as follows:

*Critical thinking*—involves literacy, reflection, and understanding how to gather and make sense of various forms of information before accepting or formulating an opinion or conclusion.

*Creativity*—uses a combination of imagination, intellect, insight, and emotion to solve problems and transform existing ideas, images, or techniques in innovative and original ways.

*Communication*—includes the mastery of foundational skills, such as language, technology, and collaboration.

2.3. **Student Learning Outcomes**

The following changes shall be made to the Baccalaureate Student Learning Outcomes (SLOs):

“Quantitative and qualitative reasoning” shall change from: “use and combine appropriate quantitative and qualitative reasoning skills to address questions and solve problems,” to “use and combine appropriate qualitative and quantitative reasoning skills to address questions and solve problems.”

“Synthesis” shall be changed from: “synthesize learned knowledge and skills relevant to one’s major or particular fields of study and apply them creatively to develop innovative outcomes,” to “synthesize learned knowledge and skills and apply them creatively to develop cross-disciplinary and innovative solutions to problems.”

Furthermore, the eight baccalaureate student learning outcomes shall be reordered as follows:

- Communicate clearly and effectively;
- Demonstrate critical, creative, and independent thought;
- Use and combine appropriate qualitative and quantitative reasoning skills;
- Collaborate with others to achieve specific goals;
- Analyze issues that interconnect human life and the natural world;
- Exhibit intercultural competencies with people of diverse backgrounds and perspectives;
- Integrate knowledge of global interconnections and interdependencies; and
- Synthesize learned knowledge and skills and apply them creatively to develop cross-disciplinary and innovative solutions to problems.

2.4. **Requirements and Options**

In addition to existing requirements, the Baccalaureate Program shall also include the following
three high impact practice requirements:

- **Writing-Infused Courses** – a requirement of two upper-division courses (6 credit hours) officially certified as being "writing-infused," taken either in the General Education program or in the major studies;
- **First-Year Experience** – a requirement of a lower-division “university success” course to be taken in the first semester (UNIV 101/105/201 or an equivalent substitution, one credit hour);
- **Career Success** – a requirement of an upper-division “career success” course to be taken near degree completion (UNIV 301 or an equivalent substitution, minimum of one credit hour); and

The Baccalaureate Program shall also emphasize these additional high impact practices:

- **Collaborative Learning** – increased expectations in General Education and major studies regarding the baccalaureate outcome of collaborative learning;
- **Engaged Learning Experience** – tag and record on the transcript all engaged learning experiences that are either:
  - a credit-bearing course certified as having an engaged learning component; or
  - a co-curricular engaged learning experience (captured as a zero-credit-hour course);
- **ePortfolio** – an electronic portfolio system (ePortfolio) shall be made available for student use.

### 2.5. High Impact Practices

High impact practices are teaching pedagogies and learning experiences that foster student engagement and success. They reinforce a PLUS integrated learning environment that encourages cross-disciplinary thinking and intellectual advancement. They also build on NIU’s extensive strength as a research institution by providing graduates with intellectual flexibility and adaptability.

#### 2.5.1. Writing-infused Courses (a minimum of six-credit hours)

Writing, when repeatedly practiced through a student’s course of study, leads to the development of related skills such critical thinking, quantitative reasoning, oral communication, and informational literacy.

Two upper-division writing-infused courses shall be mandatory for all students. These courses may be taken in General Education or within the major studies. Writing-infused courses are any existing or new upper-division courses that become certified by meeting the following guidelines:

- generate essays, reports, or other prose totaling 3,500 words per student per semester;
- offer repeated practice of writing within the discipline or context of the course;
- include discussions of writing style and structure as a formal part of the course;
- have writing assignments represent at least one-third of the total course grade;
- have an enrollment cap of 35 students; and
- coordinate with the University Writing Center to assist student writers.

Faculty training in disciplinary writing-practice shall be encouraged, but not required.
For courses that, by necessity, have larger enrollments but wish to become certified as writing-infused, the university shall create a “Writing Fellows” program that provides a cadre of undergraduate and graduate tutors to host one credit-hour “writing labs” that are linked to these larger courses and formally meet once per week to work with students on writing. These writing fellows will work directly with course instructors to coordinate learning activities and assignments that include: reading and discussion of discipline-specific writing conventions and rhetorical strategies and provide informed and constructive criticism on drafts of writing assignments. For writing-infused courses with writing labs, the 35-student cap will only apply to the writing lab portion, not the course as a whole. This allows departments to continue teaching discipline-specific courses in larger, more cost effective settings while still providing direct, personalized writing instruction to students.

2.5.2. First Year Experience (a minimum of one credit-hour)

National research has shown that first-year experience courses or equivalent assist students in their academic and social development and in their transition to college. Those who participate: (1) achieve higher grades; (2) develop a more positive perception of self; (3) participate in better and more frequent interactions with faculty and students; (4) practice greater involvement in co-curricular activities; and (5) improve their level of satisfaction with the college experience.

A first-year experience course shall now be mandatory in the first semester of entry at NIU. However, a policy shall be developed to waive this requirement for those students in degree completion programs or who enter with a substantial amount of credit hours. Currently, NIU offers a set of elective, 1-credit, 15-week courses (UNIV 101 - University Experience, UNIV 105 - Introduction to Library and Information Research, and UNIV 201 - The Transfer Experience, that qualify as a first-year experience). This first-year experience course shall:

- introduce university intellectual expectations, including the SLOs;
- offer guidance regarding General Education, pathways, and major studies;
- introduce available university engaged learning activities in five areas (community, global, internship, leadership, research);
- provide active and engaged practice in foundational skills such as writing, critical thinking, information literacy, and collaborative learning; and
- promote an awareness of university resources.

2.5.3. Career Success Course (a minimum of one credit-hour)

An upper-division career success shall meet the following guidelines:

- review students’ progress toward achieving the eight SLOs and career preparation;

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5 A similar model has been successfully implemented at the University of Wisconsin, Madison: http://writing.wisc.edu/writingfellows/. For other writing fellows programs see: http://wac.colostate.edu/fellows/.


• provide reflection upon the skills needed to achieve students’ academic, leadership, and professional goals;
• provide reflection on students’ engaged learning experiences;
• provide training in resume writing, accreditation exams, entrepreneurship, etc.; and
• use an ePortfolio (see 2.5.6. below) to encourage reflection and showcase students’ academic and professional skills and achievements.

2.5.4. Collaborative Learning

The PLUS curriculum places a high priority upon the baccalaureate SLO of “collaborating with others to achieve specific goals.” Research has shown that students who work in collaborative groups are more satisfied with their classes and retain information better. More importantly, the ability to work in a team structure is the most desired skill that employers look for among college graduates.

Collaborative learning combines two key goals: learning to work and solve problems in the company of others, and sharpening one’s own understanding by listening seriously to the insights of others, especially those with different backgrounds and life experiences.

Approaches to collaborative learning range from study groups within a course, to team-based assignments and writing, to cooperative projects and research.

Because of its desirability among employers, NIU’s collaborative learning outcome shall become a priority in the following curricula:

• writing-infused courses (see Section 2.5.1);
• first-year experience (see Section 2.5.3);
• engaged learning courses and co-curricular activities (see Section 2.5.5);
• Foundational Studies of General Education (see Section 3.3); and
• General Education Pathways (see Section 3.6).

2.5.5. Engaged Learning Courses and Co-curricular Activities

Engaged learning is a process that occurs across students’ curricular and co-curricular experiences. Engaged learning encourages students to transfer ideas and experiences to new and complex situations and make connections between disciplines.

Engaged learning activities shall be certified for transcript documentation by Registration and Records. Engaged learning activities may be curricular (credit-bearing courses) or co-curricular (non-credit bearing).

Engaged learning courses must meet the following criteria for certification:

• a structured and integrated experience that engages students in settings such as in a community agency, professional organization, or a research lab;
• critical reflection of the experience through course assignments; and
• synthesis of the experience through a final course project or portfolio.

Engaged learning courses include activities such as: (1) capstone/thesis; (2) field work;

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9 Job Outlook 2013, National Association of Colleges and Employers.
(3) guided research; (4) independent study; (5) internship; (6) practicum; (7) senior design; (8) service-learning; (9) student teaching; and (10) study abroad.

Engaged learning co-curricular activities represent supervised, on- and off-campus, non-credit bearing accomplishments that must be reviewed and approved by the Office of Student Engagement and Experiential Learning in conjunction with a faculty Engaged Learning Advisory Committee.

Engaged learning co-curricular activities must meet the following criteria for certification:

- be a first-hand immersive experience of at least 80 hours per semester (5 hours a week);  
- be directed by an appropriate mentor or instructor;  
- demonstrate intentional learning and reflection by providing an end-of-term deliverable product (reflective paper, journal, portfolio, conference presentation, etc.); and  
- be formally recorded upon a transcript through enrollment in a 0-credit option course entitled UNIV 099: PLUS Experience.

2.5.6. ePortfolios

Electronic portfolios (ePortfolios) are digital repositories of student work that provide evidence of student learning, especially for those outcomes not easily assessed by standardized measurement. Universities have used ePortfolios to deepen student learning and increase student satisfaction which results in higher retention and graduation rates, as well as improved career placement. Maintaining a reflective ePortfolio prompts students to connect the individual pieces of their learning into a coherent narrative that provides data for assessment and helps them build on that learning to achieve career and life success.

An ePortfolio system shall be made available for student use:

- to collect and select authentic student artifacts (from curricular assignments and co-curricular practices) that document progression and achievement of the baccalaureate SLOs;  
- to offer students adequate opportunities to reflect on their own learning and connect that learning to other tasks and knowledge domains; and  
- to provide a vehicle for students to project a professional identity and presence by documenting and showcasing their collegiate achievements.

2.6. Assessment

Robust assessment processes are critical to the assurance of student learning and for continued program improvement. Within degree programs, NIU has well established assessment processes and a number of mechanisms to help assure that program student learning objectives are being met. These include the annual update process, the degree program status report, program review, and—for some disciplines—accreditation reviews. Currently, General Education assessment occurs on a course by course basis with no attempt at integration across the curriculum. In addition, except for the University Writing Project, there are no integrated assessments of the baccalaureate student learning outcomes (SLOs). Lacking integrated assessments of the baccalaureate SLOs, it is impossible to determine how well NIU students are achieving these outcomes and

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9 See the Catalyst for Learning website for research and resources on ePortfolios: http://c2l.mcnrc.org/.
where further curricular reforms may be needed.

Integrated assessment of the baccalaureate SLOs can and should build on existing shared governance groups and institutional assessment resources, including: the assessment committees of individual degree programs, the General Education Committee (GEC), the University Assessment Panel (UAP), the Academic Planning Council (APC), and the Office of Assessment Services (OAS). Further, because students develop baccalaureate skills through their General Education, major, and co-curricular experiences, an integrated assessment strategy must sample student work from each of these areas.

The specific goals of the proposed integrated assessment strategy are to:

- generate data that can be used to gauge students’ progress toward and achievement of the baccalaureate student learning outcomes;
- provide data that are useful for decision-making at multiples levels (i.e., degree programs, colleges, General Education, baccalaureate);
- encourage assessment of authentic student artifacts (i.e., real work) as opposed to using standardized assessment tests; and
- support and take advantage of wide-spread use of ePortfolios, both at NIU and by our community college partners.

The recommended strategy for integrated assessment of the baccalaureate SLOs is grounded in a four-year rolling cycle of continuous improvement that includes discrete steps for data collection, analysis, decision-making, and implementation of changes. The process would be phased in such that data collection is initiated with just a subset of the baccalaureate SLOs in each year and could proceed as follows:

- Year 1: critical thinking and written and oral communication;
- Year 2: quantitative/qualitative reasoning and analysis of interconnections between human life and the natural world;
- Year 3: collaboration/teamwork and intercultural competency;
- Year 4: global integration and synthesis.

For each set of SLOs, data collection would entail harvesting student data from course imbedded assessments (preferred) and/or from assessments of student work by groups of faculty SLO experts. The Office of Assessment Services would coordinate this process, conduct analyses, and provide summaries of the data for the university community. Shared governance committees (such as the GEC) and administrative bodies (such as the Provost’s Office) would then be responsible for interpreting the data relative to program goals, deciding what actions (if any) should be taken, and implementing the recommended changes. The process would be staggered such that all of the baccalaureate SLOs are continually in some phase of the improvement cycle: data collection, analysis, decision-making, or implementation of changes. Note that this approach is intended to replace the current system of course-by-course assessment by the GEC for the purpose of determining which courses participate within the General Education program.

To be successful, this strategy will require a number of enabling mechanisms and investments:

- Clear articulation of how each degree program’s student learning outcomes map to the baccalaureate SLOs;
- A curriculum map for each degree program that specifies how each class in the major contributes to each degree program and (by extension) each baccalaureate SLOs;
- Specification of the primary baccalaureate SLOs addressed by each General Education course and co-curricular experience;
Rubrics for each baccalaureate SLO that: a) can be tailored for application to actual student work; b) allow for meaningful aggregation of assessment results across disciplines; and c) can show student development across time;

An ePortfolio platform (see Section 2.5.6.) that provides a repository for the student work that demonstrates their progress toward the development of each baccalaureate SLO;

Software that facilitates harvesting of assessment data from both Blackboard Learn and students' ePortfolios as well as enabling aggregation for specific audiences (i.e. a degree program, a college, the GEC, or the Provosts' Office); and

Support for faculty who adopt and modify rubrics for course imbedded assessment related to the baccalaureate SLO(s) and who sit on assessment committees that score student artifacts relative to a particular baccalaureate SLO.

This strategy enables a truly programmatic assessment of students’ progress toward and attainment of the baccalaureate student learning outcomes. In addition, the data it generates could be used for multiple purposes including program review and discipline accreditation.
3. General Education Program (revised)

The General Education Program catalog language shall undergo the following changes:

3.1. Purpose/Mission

The General Education Program at Northern Illinois University provides foundational skills and breadth of knowledge through study in a broad variety of disciplines. Together with course work in the major and co-curricular experiences, General Education provides students with opportunities to develop proficiencies in NIU’s baccalaureate student learning outcomes.

3.2. Framework and Goals

The PLUS General Education Program consists of two basic sets of course work and adopts the baccalaureate SLOs as its goals (see Figure 2).

First, Foundational Studies develop the competencies necessary to succeed academically and personally. They emphasize a student’s ability to: (1) communicate clearly and effectively; (2) think critically and creatively; (3) reason quantitatively and qualitatively; and (4) work collaboratively across disciplines.

Second, Knowledge Domain courses continue to develop foundational competencies, as well as assure exposure to a broad array of ideas, disciplines, and ways of obtaining and interpreting information. In particular, Knowledge Domain courses emphasize a student’s ability to: (1) connect human life to the natural world, (2) understand and respect diverse cultures, (3) and integrate knowledge of global interconnections; and (4) synthesize knowledge and skills.

Knowledge Domain requirements may optionally be fulfilled by a set of newly designed PLUS Pathways. A Pathway is a body of coursework drawn from all three Knowledge Domains that examines a theme from different disciplinary perspectives. In order to increase the value and relevance of General Education, Knowledge Domain courses will present their course content in a manner that demonstrates how this material relates to and is integrated with their discipline and other disciplines. In this manner, Pathways will further enhance the level of content integration and will give students and instructors greater opportunities to develop the skill of collaborating effectively across disciplines.
There are two available options for students choosing to fulfill their Knowledge Domain courses through one of the Pathways.

A **Pathway Focus** shall be noted on a student transcript and may be earned by taking three courses from a single Pathway, one course from each Knowledge Domain.

A **Pathway Minor** shall be noted on a student transcript and may be earned by taking six courses from a single Pathway, one lower-division course from each Knowledge Domain, plus three upper-division courses from at least two different Knowledge Domains.

### 3.3. Foundational Studies

Through Foundational Studies, students will begin to develop the fundamental skills of written communication, oral communication, and numeracy, all of which are required for academic, professional, and personal success. Through Foundational Studies, students will learn to: (1) write skillfully with a thorough awareness of context, audience, and purpose; (2) communicate effectively through speaking, presenting, and debating, with an awareness of the specific practices in different disciplines; (3) perform basic numerical computations, display facility with using formal and quantitative reasoning analysis and problem solving, and interpret mathematical models and statistical information; and (4) work collaboratively with peers from different backgrounds.

The Foundational Studies General Education requirements consist of two courses in Writing Composition, one course in Oral Communication, and one course in Quantitative Literacy. Foundational Studies courses do not count toward General Education Knowledge Domain requirements.

#### 3.3.1. Foundational Studies Writing

The new foundational studies component of General Education contains a modified writing sequence that may continue to be offered in constitutive semesters, but aims to provide a transition from general composition to domain-specific writing. This sequence consists of a:

- **100-level Rhetoric and Composition** (3 credit-hours). Writing and revising argumentative and analytical essays. This requirement is satisfied by ENGL 103 or a similar course. Enrollment in each section shall be capped at 25.\(^{11}\)

- **200-level Writing in the Domains** (3 credit-hours). Writing and revising argumentative and analytical essays; analyze, evaluate, and synthesize material from a variety of sources; incorporate domain-appropriate documentation styles and rhetorical strategies.\(^{12}\) This course provides a transition from general writing to domain-specific writing and also provides students practical experience in collaborative essay and report writing. Enrollment in each section shall be capped at 25. There shall be three or four different versions

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\(^{11}\) The Conference on College Composition and Communication (CCCC), a professional organization within the National Council of Teachers of English, specifically recommends that no more than 20 students be permitted in any writing class, and that developmental writing classes be capped at 15 students. Furthermore, the CCCC recommends that no college instructor teach more than 60 writing students per term.

\(^{12}\) Students polled in 2014 focus groups indicated a desire for more practical and theme-based writing in the second course of this writing sequence.
of the class, each with its own course number and aligned with a different knowledge domain. For example:

- ENGL 203 – Writing in the Knowledge Domains
- ENGL 204 – Writing in Creativity and Critical Analysis
- ENGL 205 – Writing in Nature & Technology
- ENGL 206 – Writing in Society & Culture

Students may choose which of the 200-level writing courses to enroll in. Any one of them will satisfy degree requirements in any undergraduate program at NIU. The proposed second year writing course is modeled, in part, on the successful implementation of English 280, in the Western Writing Program at Western Illinois University.

### 3.4. Knowledge Domains

The three General Education Knowledge Domains are areas of human endeavor (Creativity & Critical Analysis; Nature & Technology; and Society & Culture) and will: (1) help students attain a sound liberal education and acquire sufficient general knowledge and intellectual versatility to become productive and resourceful members of society, (2) explore human thought and relations in order to understand and respect cultural heritage, (3) provide an understanding of the scientific method and the application of scientific facts and principles pertaining to the natural and technological worlds, and (4) examine the role of knowledge in improving human welfare.

Knowledge Domains are related to the traditional disciplinary-based distributional areas (Humanities & Arts, Science & Mathematics, Social Sciences, and Interdisciplinary Studies). However, they are intended to be broader and more inclusive, which will allow for an increase in both the range and number of General Education courses that are available to students.

#### 3.4.1. Creativity & Critical Analysis

Courses in Creativity & Critical Analysis will challenge students to develop the skills involved in critical reflection and creative expression. Students will: (1) become acquainted with methods for analyzing primary sources and critically evaluating the ideas, events, traditions, and belief systems that have shaped human experience and expression; (2) explore fundamental modes of aesthetic and creative expression; and (3) understand and evaluate the diversity of humanity's most notable cultural achievements from artistic, historical, linguistic, literary, and philosophical perspectives.

#### 3.4.2. Nature & Technology

Courses in Nature & Technology will develop a student's understanding of the role of science, technology, engineering, and mathematics and their relevance to societal issues. This domain encompasses human activities through which we observe, measure, model, and interpret the natural world and physical universe. Courses will explore the process of scientific discovery and how the resulting knowledge is applied to understand technological and societal change. Students will: (1) be able to articulate society's connections to, and responsibility towards, the natural world; and (2) learn to apply the scientific method, including assessing empirical data, investigating the predictions of existing theories, and developing experimentally testable hypotheses.

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13 See [http://www.wiu.edu/cas/english_and_journalism/writing/](http://www.wiu.edu/cas/english_and_journalism/writing/)
3.4.3. **Society & Culture**

Courses in Society & Culture will develop understanding of the methods of inquiry used to study humanity, from individual behavior to how people organize and govern nations, societies, and cultures. Student will: (1) learn the role, principles, and methods of social and behavioral science in understanding individual and collective behavior in society; (2) hone the reasoning skills required to understand theories of human behavior and social phenomena; and (3) develop the ability to understand and evaluate the communication of results in the social and behavioral sciences.

3.5 **Requirements**

The General Education Program is reduced to a minimum of 33 semester credit-hours of course work:

- **Foundational Studies**
  - Quantitative Literacy – 1 course, a minimum of 3 hours.
  - Oral Communication – 1 course, a minimum of 3 hours.
  - Writing Composition – 2 courses, a minimum of 6 hours.

- **Knowledge Domains**
  - Creativity & Critical Analysis – 2 courses, a minimum of 6 hours.
  - Nature & Technology – 2 courses, a minimum of 6 hours.
  - Society & Culture – 2 courses, a minimum of 6 hours.
  - Elective from any Knowledge Domain – 1 course, a minimum of 3 hours.

The 12 General Education semester hours required in Foundational Studies may be earned by: (1) successfully completing designated courses; (2), by receiving transfer credit; or (3) by passing a competency examination.

The 21 General Education semester hours required in the three Knowledge Domains may be earned by: (1) credit articulation petition approved by the General Education Committee; (2) successful completion of designated courses; (3) transfer articulation; or (4) credit by examination. Departments shall review and approve transfer articulation of major studies courses.

Specific requirements include:

- The required minimum of 21 semester hours in Knowledge Domain studies cannot include more than two courses in any one department. (A course with an affiliated laboratory experience shall be counted as single course.)

- A maximum of two approved General Education courses in the student’s major department may be used to fulfill General Education or Pathway minor requirements. (A course with an affiliated laboratory experience shall be counted as single course.)

These requirements assure exposure to multiple disciplines, and create additional curricular flexibility in the baccalaureate program. Individual departments may not impose additional restrictions on the courses that their majors may apply to General Education.

3.6 **Pathways**

A Pathway is a body of course work drawn from all three Knowledge Domains that examines a theme from different disciplinary perspectives. Courses in a Pathway will coalesce around a set of large questions that are central to the Pathway theme. Each course will address one or more of these questions. The Foundational Studies courses cannot participate in a Pathway.
Students have the option (but are not required) to organize their required General Education courses into a Pathway focus or Pathway minor, as long as the Knowledge Domain distributional requirements are fulfilled.

Students may sample courses in multiple pathways as long as the knowledge domain distributional requirements are fulfilled. Students are encouraged, but not required, to concentrate their domains courses in a single pathway. A pathway is intended to enhance a student’s interest in a particular theme. Completing a set of designated courses in a single pathway will be documented on a student’s transcript either as Pathway Focus or Pathway Minor. Courses used towards fulfilling a Pathway focus or minor may not count towards another Pathway focus or minor. Any General Education course used towards a Pathway minor may also counts towards another minor at NIU.

- A Pathway Focus represents an enhanced examination of a particular theme comprising three courses from a single Pathway. A Focus shall be earned by successfully completing one designated course from each Knowledge Domain.
- A Pathway Minor represents an in-depth examination of a particular theme comprising six courses from a single pathway. A Pathway Minor shall be earned by successfully completing one lower-division course from each Knowledge Domain, plus three upper-division courses taken from at least two Knowledge Domains.

Students have the option to organize their required General Education courses into a Pathway focus or Pathway minor. Earning a Pathway focus or Pathway minor creates no additional course requirements to complete their General Education program. Therefore, students may simultaneously pursue a Pathway minor and a traditional minor without any additional credit load. Pathway minors complement traditional minors; no existing minor will be required to change to a Pathway minor.

Each course in a pathway shall:

- coalesce around a set of questions that are central to the pathway theme,
- strive to address all of these questions,
- include collaborative learning activities, and
- potentially provide opportunities for engaged learning.

3.7. Administrative Structure

The General Education Committee (GEC) shall continue in its role as the oversight body for developing and monitoring General Education policy.

The GEC shall determine course participation and course placement in the General Education Program.

The GEC shall adjudicate petitions for General Education credit articulation, but not for specific course articulations. Departments retain the right for course-to-course articulation in the major.

The GEC shall work closely with the Office of Assessment Services to identify mechanisms to carry out programmatic assessment and will have responsibility for making necessary changes in response.

The composition of the GEC shall continue to follow the guidelines stipulated in University Bylaws Article 15.6.3 that assures broad student and faculty representation. Members shall include:

- eight faculty representatives: three from CLAS (one each from the humanities, social sciences, and other sciences), and one representative each from CBUS, CEDU, CEET,
CHHS, and CVPA (three-year staggered terms, renewable);
• two faculty representatives from the University Coordinating Council (one year, renewable);
• three student representatives will be selected by the GEC from nominees submitted by the student advisory committees of the undergraduate degree-granting colleges (one year, renewable);
• the Vice Provost (ex officio);
• the Associate Vice Provost (ex officio); and
• the Associate Vice Provost for Academic Outcomes Assessment (ex officio).

The GEC chair is elected annually from the faculty representatives and shall receive release time or compensation for coordinating the committee’s work.

Other administrative tasks associated with General Education, such as ensuring that adequate funding of the program is available and that courses are offered and space needs are met, are ultimately the responsibility of the Provost.

3.8. Pathway Management

The number and thematic content of pathways shall be determined by the GEC in order to address: student interest and demand, thematic coherence, and an ongoing focus on General Education goals and the baccalaureate student learning outcomes.

Ordinarily, a course shall participate in only a single Pathway. Exceptions to this rule shall be arbitrated by the GEC as long as any single course adequately demonstrates its capability of meeting the criteria and expectations of the Pathways it contributes to. Any single course may only ultimately count towards a single Pathway focus or Pathway minor.

Each course in a Pathway must also include opportunities for students to work collaboratively with peers from different backgrounds.

The GEC shall appoint a coordinator who will work with the GEC and Associate Vice Provost to oversee each Pathway. The coordinator shall be responsible for:

• maintaining the thematic coherence of the Pathway description and core questions;
• assuring that sufficient courses are offered from each of the three domains;
• organizing course offerings to foster student interest and meet enrollment demand;
• conducting an annual workshop for faculty participating in each Pathway;
• serving as a liaison between the GEC and Pathway faculty;
• filing the application form for course participation in a Pathway;
• facilitate the sampling and collection of signature artifacts for assessment;
• assisting the GEC when a Pathway is reviewed for relevancy, enrollment, and success; and
• eliminating Pathways that cease to be relevant.

Coordinator terms of appointment shall be decided by the GEC. The task force recommends that coordinators be provided additional compensation and/or release time for their efforts.

3.9. Transfer and Articulation

Illinois Articulation Initiative coded transfer courses are applied as General Education credit to the Foundational Studies and Knowledge Domains requirements without any review. The GEC shall adjudicate petitions for non-IAI transfer credits to satisfy General Education requirements. Departments will review and approve transfer articulation of major studies courses.
4. PLUS Implementation

Upon the approval of the PLUS curriculum changes, the Provost shall form an implementation team through a consultative process that includes the Faculty Senate and other bodies of campus leadership. The team shall be charged by the Provost to plan and carry out an effective and successful implementation process for the new curriculum.

An implementation process shall be developed in consultation with administration, faculty, staff, and students and will be transparent and equitable, with appropriate submission and evaluation proposals for General Education Pathway courses and certified baccalaureate high-impact courses. To allow smooth transition and sufficient time for development of PLUS pedagogy, curricular changes will be phased in.

The entire program shall be reviewed by the Office of the Provost five years after its implementation is complete and every five years thereafter.

4.1. Writing-Infused Courses (Fall 2015)

Because writing-infused courses (see Section 2.5.1.) require additional instructional preparation and training, the Provost shall provide opportunities for faculty development in writing instruction. Support shall include (but not be limited to):

- annual workshops for training in writing-infused instruction;
- a fully funded student-support writing center that supports the instructional and PLUS mission of providing supplemental writing instruction for all colleges and degree programs;
- a university writing committee that shall consult with the writing center to approve and support PLUS writing-infused courses; and
- a writing-fellows program that trains student writing fellows who provide supplemental writing instruction in certain writing-infused courses.

4.2. Collaborative Learning (Spring 2016)

Support for collaborative learning (see Section 2.5.2.) will include (but is not limited to):

- annual workshops for training in collaborative and team learning instruction.
4.3. First-year Experience (Fall 2015)

UNIV 101/105/201 (see Section 2.5.3.) is currently taken by approximately 60% of all new students in 80 sections. Approximately 50 additional sections would be required in order to allow 100% student participation. Support shall include (but not be limited to):

- additional graduate student and peer instruction support; and
- instructor stipends.

4.4. Engaged Learning (Fall 2015)

The process of course and co-curricular experience (see Section 2.5.4.) certification has already begun by the Office of Experiential Learning and Engagement (OSEEL) and shall be ready for codification upon student transcripts in fall of 2105. Support shall include (but not be limited to):

- a university engaged learning committee that shall consult with OSEEL to approve and support PLUS engaged learning courses and co-curricular activities.

4.5. Career Success (Spring 2016)

Approximately 70 sections of a new UNIV301 (see Section 2.5.5.) shall be required to supplement any existing career success course offered in the major. Support shall include (but not be limited to):

- an appropriate faculty committee to approve and support career success courses.

4.6. General Education Course Re-Assignments (Fall 2015)

The GEC in coordination with the implementation team shall facilitate the placement of all existing General Education and IAI code courses into the new areas of study (see Section 3.2.) as soon as possible.

4.7. Pathways (Fall 2015 and Fall 2016)

Pathways (see Section 3.5.) and their courses shall be developed, formed, and reviewed in a staged process, with three Pathways operational by fall 2015 and the remainder by fall of 2016. An initial set of suggested Pathways have been developed by the PLUS Task Force in consultation with campus faculty from various colleges. They include: (1) Creativity, Innovation & Change; (2) Exploring Heritage; (3) Health & Wellness; (4) Global Affairs; (5) Identities; (6) Learning; (7) Power & Social Justice; and (8) Sustainability (see Appendix B). The implementation team and GEC shall assist faculty in Pathway creation.

Pathway Coordinators shall be selected or elected as soon as possible and will work with faculty and departments to populate each pathway with both existing and new courses. A Pathway shall consist of approximately 15 lower-division courses and 10 upper-division courses. The implementation team and the GEC shall assist the Pathway Coordinators in ensuring that Pathways are both appealing to students and address the stated goals and learning outcomes of the General Education program. Chairs and deans shall indicate their support for a particular course’s inclusion in a Pathway.

The GEC shall make the final decisions regarding the acceptance of the proposed Pathway packages and assure the planning and approval of all courses proposed for General Education.
Support shall include (but not be limited to):

- stipends for Pathways course transformation;
- stipends for the Pathway coordinators;
- modification to the Student Information system by Registration and Records; and
- advisor education and training.

4.8. Assessment (Fall 2016)

Well-aligned measures and data collection from individual courses and across the entire curriculum shall begin in fall of 2016. Support shall include (but not be limited to):

- an ePortfolio platform (see Section 2.5.6.) that provides a repository for the student work that demonstrates their progress toward the development of each baccalaureate SLOs;
- software that facilitates harvesting of assessment data from both Blackboard Learn and students’ ePortfolios as well as enabling aggregation for specific audiences (i.e. a degree program, a college, the GEC, or the Provosts’ Office);
- one-time stipend supported training session for faculty who adopt and modify rubrics for course imbedded assessment related to the baccalaureate SLO(s) that are emphasized in their course; and,
- ongoing stipend support for the faculty on the assessment committees who score student artifacts relative to a particular baccalaureate SLO.
A. Appendix A—Communication and Outreach

Between August 2013 and September 2014, the PLUS Task Force conducted surveys, presentations, workshops, and focus groups to be inclusive as possible during the process of curricular reform. A priority of the Task was to execute a transparent strategy of communication and outreach for to faculty, students, and administration to best navigate between the tensions of a traditional state-mandated General Education compact and the institutional desire to foster curricular creativity and synergy.

Our approach was to employ a continuous feedback loop of vetting potential changes to NIU’s constituent groups rather than a more traditional institutional approach of creating a singular plan of curricular reform and bringing it forth for final comment. We believe that this approach has resulted in the transformation of a broad and tumultuous exchange of stakeholder ideas into an interconnected force that has helped guide the process of curricular innovation.

Table 1-1. Summary of NIU constituent touch points sorted by face-to-face and survey formats.

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<th>Participant</th>
<th>Face-to-Face</th>
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<td>82</td>
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The PLUS Task Force had a total of 2,210 touch points with NIU constituents (Table 1-1). The face-to-face setting consisted of presentations and focus groups. Student focus groups were held on campus and scheduled with various constituent groups. The workshops and open houses conducted for faculty, advisors, and administrators were also aimed at a variety of colleges and venues. External presentations were also made to our community college partners to assess their perception of the expected changes.

The survey touch points were conducted via using on-line and paper format during an on-line
survey in the October of 2013, a public workshop conducted in January of 2014, and a second on-line survey conducted in May of 2014. Table 1-2 lists the itemized lists of the presentations as well as the final tallies of the participants.

Table 1-2 lists the itemized lists of the presentations as well as the final tallies of the participants.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>DATE</th>
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B. Appendix B—Suggested Pathways

A set of suggested Pathways have been developed by the PLUS Task Force in consultation with campus faculty from various colleges. Pathways are themes that students would find as relevant and engaging. They include: (1) Creativity, Innovation & Change; (2) Exploring Heritage; (3) Health & Wellness; (4) Global Systems; (5) Identities; (6) Learning; (7) Power & Social Justice; and (8) Sustainability.

*What is Creativity, Innovation and Change?*

Creativity and innovation are essential in artistic expression and in problem-solving for individuals, ecologies, technologies, organizations, and societies. In this pathway, students have an opportunity to explore how we are creative, and innovation and change in its many forms. Courses in this pathway will explore one or more of the following questions:

- Why are we creative?
- How can we develop new ways of thinking and behaving?
- What is the process of creativity and how does it manifest?
- What are the antecedents and outcomes of change as experienced by individuals, groups, organizations, and/or societies?
- How are new innovation and technologies developed and diffused?
- How do groups or organizations engage in innovation and manage change?

*What is Exploring Heritage?*

Exploring heritage considers a timeless question: how has the past shaped the present? By studying this question you will expand your understanding of who we are, as individuals, as members of societies, and as participants in the human condition. Students who pursue the Exploring Heritage Pathway take courses in Anthropology, Art History, Biology, Black Studies, Communications, Geology, Geography, Education, English, Foreign Languages and Literatures, History, Latino and Latin American Studies, Music, Political Science, Sociology, and Women’s Studies. Courses in this pathway will explore one or more of the following questions:

- What do we know about the origins of the universe?
- What do we know about the origins of humans?
- How have societies made group decisions?
• How have societies balanced individual and group needs?
• How have societies organized work and economic life?
• How have gender, sexuality, and family shaped human experience?
• How have people interacted with groups other than their own?
• How have individuals and societies expressed themselves creatively?
• What have been the major subjects for visual communication over historical periods?
• What have been the various roles of artists in societies?
• How and why do humans tell stories?
• How have different cultures understood beauty? Ugliness? Ethical choices?

What is Global Affairs?

The Global Affairs Pathway is intended for students interested in international issues and the global processes that impact the world around them. These issues include the interconnectivity of markets, cultures, politics, and people across the globe. Modern technology and ease of travel have made the world a much smaller place, figuratively speaking. This Pathway is designed to provide students with the necessary skills and knowledge to navigate this complex system of symbiotic relationships. This Pathway recognizes the information required to navigate this system of interconnectivity, and will prepare students with the ability to understand these systems. Courses in this pathway will explore one or more of the following questions:

• How does the rise of global interconnections affect individual rights and assets?
• How do global relations foster or hinder economic change?
• Are there abuses that can be perpetrated by the rise of Globalism?
• What avenues of progress are opened up through global relationships?

What is Health and Wellness?

The call to advance health and wellness signals individuals to improve the lives and health of themselves, their families, and their broader communities within their social context. This Pathway provides students an opportunity to integrate a broad range of knowledge and skills to promote the life changes and optimize wellbeing. The courses chosen for this Pathway interweave and blend a variety of factors from the physical, environmental, emotional, social, spiritual, and intellectual realms that constitute a holistic approach to health. This Pathway recognizes that achieving optimal health and wellness is a lifelong process, and that a thorough understanding of the factors that define and determine wellness and improve health is necessary to comprehend the reciprocal relationship between the mind and the body and to take personal and social responsibility to create opportunities for well-being. Courses in this Pathway will explore one or more of the following questions:

• What prevents or minimizes chronic disease?
• What choices can have larger impact on the health of a community?
• What behaviors will further reinforce healthy choices?
• How can these behaviors improve understanding of connections between humans and our environment?

What is Identities?

This pathway explores how both individual and group identities are produced, maintained, and transformed. Students will be introduced to various theoretical perspectives that deal with identity formation, including constructions of “the normal.” Courses in this pathway explore the components of identity: gender, sexual orientation, race, ethnicity, religion, language, social
class, and bodily difference. Students will understand better how an individual can be at once both cause and consequence of society, and both a product and unique agent of social action. Courses in this pathway will explore one or more of the following questions:

- How do identities constitute lived realities and shared communities?
- What evidence indicates that identities are socially constructed?
- What does it mean to be an “American?”
- How do prejudice and institutional discrimination shape certain individuals and groups?
- How might individuals, through social movements, affect political change?
- How do popular representations of a group affect how members of that group see themselves and how others see them?

What is Learning?

Learning is a skill that is fundamentally relevant to all areas of life, from the development of an organism in its natural context over institutions of instruction to sophisticated intelligent technology. The specific processes and circumstances related to learning vary with cultural, historical, sociological and individual factors, making the area of learning a richly diverse and interdisciplinary field with many methodological perspectives, emphases and applications. The study of learning offers applications to personal, societal and professional areas of life. Students learn about the way in which learning is influenced by context, how to improve it, how learning compares across organisms and artificial systems, and how to assess its effectiveness. The study of learning also pertains to informed citizenship, which requires development of the ability to use information to think about an issue critically, from multiple perspectives and with an understanding of diverse methodological approaches. Courses in this pathway will explore one or more of the following questions:

- What is the general nature of learning?
- What are parallels and distinctions between learning, development and adaptation?
- How does learning interact with our cultural, societal and technological context?
- What are the methods of training and learning in different contexts?
- What role do inter-disciplinary approaches have in modern problem solving and thought?

What is Power & Social Justice?

The prosperity, stability, and wellness of a diverse society demands that its citizens be able to contribute to public discourse and policymaking in an educated and thoughtful manner. This Pathway is designed to provide students with the necessary skills and knowledge to be prepared for active and responsible engagement in the social decision-making process, to unite people of different social identities, and to create and sustain social and political movements to support a just and equitable society. This Pathway recognizes that public issue decisions need to be tied to facts, a fully developed personal sense of social justice, and a thorough understanding of the political and economic mechanisms that guide the policy process. The courses chosen for this Pathway address one or more of these three elements to provide students with a knowledge base that will prepare them for a lifetime of informed participation in the policymaking process. They address the skills necessary to be leaders in our globalized society. Courses in this pathway will explore one or more of the following questions:

- What is the nature of power and social justice?
- How are power and social justice manifested?
• How do power and social justice operate?
• How do power and social justice influence the construction of individual identities?
• How can changes in power be motivated and challenged by social and political movements?
• How are the power structures of modern society restrained or enabled by social justice?

What is Sustainability?

Sustainability means different things to different people. It has been defined as development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs. The core value is intergenerational equity and respect for the planet and all of its occupants. It includes both fiscal and environmental sustainability through economic and societal activities. People and technology are both parts of the solution and that its costs and benefits are collective. Courses in this pathway will explore one or more of the following questions:

• What makes a sustainable community?
• How can economic and societal activities create a more sustainable world?
• In what ways do humans depend on natural systems and vice versa?
• How do unsustainable practices affect the environment?
• How can we practice sustainability and apply these principals to our worldview?
• What role can technology, culture, and nature play in forming a sustainable world?
Faculty Participants Who Devised Draft Pathway Language

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Bart Woodstrup  
Paul Wright
The PLUS Task Force received input from more than 2200 students, faculty, staff and administrators. The task force also received over 30 written responses regarding the Progressive Learning in Undergraduate Studies (PLUS) draft report of 09.25.2014, as well as valuable verbal feedback at 10 public or departmental forums across campus. We appreciate the effort and thoughtfulness of all the comments we have received and have worked hard to consider them each in detail.

Through surveys and focus groups and in-person meetings, the task force identified five key issues that had broad-based support across all constituent groups:

- Greater curricular flexibility, including increasing General Education course offerings;
- Reducing the minimum number of required General Education courses from 13 to 11;
- Increased focus on writing skills throughout the baccalaureate;
- Greater relevance of General Education courses to the major area studies; and
- Infusion of engaged learning practices throughout the baccalaureate curriculum.

These five issues guided the construction of the PLUS baccalaureate model at all stages of the reform process and continue to influence decisions regarding both the final curriculum design and the implementation process.

Since the public dissemination of the PLUS model on 9/25/2014, the task force has received a number of positive and worthwhile suggestions for inclusion in the current model, and wishes to address multiple comments along the following themes:

- implementation;
- a restatement of science literacy goals and a requirement for a science laboratory experience;
- a three-credit diversity course requirement;
- an engaged learning requirement;
- the proposed second-year writing requirement;
- information literacy as first-year experience;
• a waiver of the first year experience for advanced students;
• a foreign language endorsement by the task force; and
• the compatibility of Pathway minors and traditional minors.

Following is the task force’s explanation of its decision concerning each of the above proposed revisions to the PLUS baccalaureate curriculum.

Implementation

The task force received considerable feedback regarding the implementation of various facets of the PLUS components. While the PLUS Task Force is simply advisory and will not oversee implementation, we acknowledge the concerns shared by our colleagues about the many nuances of curricular change. All comments will be passed on to the Provost’s Office who will oversee the formation of an implementation team once any or all of the PLUS recommendations are approved and accepted as changes in the undergraduate catalog.

Science Literacy and a Science Laboratory Requirement

On 10.10.2014 the PLUS Task Force received a letter from five science department chairs in the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences in which they argue for a General Education science literacy and laboratory course requirement. On 10.10.2014 the task force received a letter from the Associate Dean of the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences expressing similar concerns.

The task force agrees that scientific literacy is key to a well-rounded education. The task force also agrees that experiential learning can enhance students’ understanding of the scientific method and science literacy.

In response to the call by the science chairs to highlight the importance of science literacy, the task force rewrote the description of the Nature & Technology knowledge domain to strengthen the role science plays in General Education:

Courses in Nature & Technology will develop a student’s understanding of the role of science, technology, engineering, and mathematics and their relevance to societal issues. This domain encompasses human activities through which we observe, measure, model, and interpret the natural world and physical universe. Courses will explore the process of scientific discovery and how the resulting knowledge is applied to understand technological and societal change. Students will: (1) be able to articulate society's connections to, and responsibility towards, the natural world; and (2) learn to apply the scientific method, including assessing empirical data, investigating the predictions of existing theories, and developing experimentally testable hypotheses.

While the task force recognizes the importance of science literacy, it also recognizes the importance of art literacy, information literacy, and technological literacy. Each of these areas could legitimately request a General Education requirement. However, including a requirement in each of these areas would lessen flexibility and increase the overall credit burden of the General Education program. As a result, the task force has chosen to include none of these requirements in its final recommendations.

The task force reached a similar conclusion regarding a science laboratory requirement. While it values experiential learning in any form, an equally legitimate claim exists to require an art studio, theater/dance studio, clinical practice, or other practicums in a wide range of disciplines. As a result, the task force has chosen to propose to include none of these requirements in its final recommendations. The task force encourages instructors of STEM courses to include experiential learning activities within all their courses and to seek recognition of these experiences as high impact practices.
A Diversity Knowledge Domain

On 10.08.2014 the PLUS Task Force received a letter from power & social justice faculty members in which they argue for a three-credit hour diversity requirement. On 10.10.2014 the PLUS Task Force also received a letter from the Directors of Programs with interdisciplinary minors in which they argue for a three-credit hour diversity requirement and raised concerns regarding the proposed Pathways minor.

The task force recognizes the importance and pervasiveness of diversity issues in contemporary society. It also notes the existing mechanisms and programs at NIU designed to raise awareness of diversity issues, including the Multicultural Curriculum Transformation Institute as well as other programs and activities designed to promote awareness and appreciation of the university’s diverse community (see http://www.niu.edu/diversity/resources/index.shtml). Additionally, the task force recognizes that diversity issues are prominent in a broad range of fields such as allied health, the arts, black studies, business, education, gender and sexuality studies, the humanities, Latino and Latin American studies, the social sciences, southeast Asian studies, and women studies.

The proposed PLUS curriculum augments opportunities to increase diversity awareness through the following:

- a revised Baccalaureate goal/mission statement –
  
  The baccalaureate experience at Northern Illinois University challenges students to think critically, create, and communicate by participating in a progressive, engaged learning environment. Major area studies, General Education, and co-curricular experiences prepare students to become productive members of a culturally and globally diverse society, and lifelong learners ready to meet the challenges of a dynamic career;

- the Intercultural Competencies baccalaureate student learning outcome –
  exhibit intercultural competencies with people of diverse backgrounds and perspectives;

- the Global Interconnections baccalaureate student learning outcome –
  integrate knowledge of global interconnections and interdependencies.

- the Collaboration baccalaureate student learning outcome –
  collaborate with others to achieve specific goals;

- the broad and inclusive titles and descriptions of the knowledge domains; and

- the thematic Pathways.

The members of the PLUS task force recognize the value of a curriculum that prepares students for success in global community and that enables students to collaborate and to communicate across communities that are diverse in terms of culture, race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, class, disability, and religion. However, the task force unanimously concludes that adding a three-credit diversity requirement would only partially address the need to explore and respect the experiences of people from diverse backgrounds. There is also a shared concern that a three-credit requirement may limit rather than enhance students’ academic inquiry, analysis, and understanding of issues around diversity. In addition, the three-credit diversity requirement would also reduce curricular flexibility by removing the General Education elective.

The task force believes that PLUS represents an excellent framework for addressing diversity issues, and that PLUS will provide rich opportunities for students and faculty to develop skills and concepts related to intercultural communication, cultural competence, and social justice. As a result, the task force has chosen to not include an explicit diversity course requirement in the final recommendations.
An Engaged Learning Requirement

Faculty and students rated engaged and experiential learning as one of the most important proposed changes to the existing baccalaureate curriculum. Additionally, the task force considered a suggestion to include an engaged learning graduation requirement. In response, the task force made engaged learning an integral practice as part of the following required components: the first-year experience course, General Education foundational studies courses, General Education Pathways courses, and the career success course. Because engaged learning is required in numerous courses throughout the PLUS curriculum, the task force has chosen to not include an engaged learning requirement in the final recommendations.

Second-year writing

On 10.06.2014 the PLUS Task Force received a letter from the Department of English expressing their concern over the alteration of the existing General Education writing composition sequence (ENGL 103/ENGL 104). On 10.10.2014 the task force received a letter from the Associate Dean of the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences expressing similar concerns.

The task force acknowledges that the ENGL 103/ENGL104 sequence, which is offered in the freshman year, represents an existing strength of our General Education program that is recognized nationally. The task force concurs with the Department of English that offering English 104 in the first semester of the sophomore year rather than the second-semester of the freshman year would have a negative impact on student success, eroding the continuity and pedagogical efficacy of having consecutive semesters of writing.

The task force has chosen to retitle the proposed writing in the domains course from second-year to 200-level so that it may still be offered in consecutive semesters. The task force recommends that ENGL 104 be converted into a set of 200-level “writing in the domains” courses. This change does not decrease flexibility nor increase the overall credit burden of the General Education program.

Information Literacy, First Year Experience, and Advanced Students

On 10.06.2014 the PLUS Task Force received a letter from the Library faculty suggesting that UNIV 105 serve an alternative first-year experience offering (in addition to UNIV 101/201). The task force also received numerous comments regarding the negative impact a mandatory first-year experience would have for certain transfer students.

The task force concurs with the Library faculty that information literacy represents an important skill emphasis. The task force also acknowledges that a mandatory requirement for a first-year experience may prove problematic for degree completion students (those entering with previous A.S. or A.A. degrees).

The task force has chosen to add UNIV 105 to the list of possible first-year experience course offerings. This change does not decrease flexibility nor increase the overall credit burden of the General Education program. The task force has also chosen to add the following language in its final recommendations:

A policy shall be developed to waive the first-year experience requirement for those students in degree completion programs or who enter with a certain minimum amount of credit hours.

—

1 The AACU identifies the follows as high impact practices: First-Year Seminars and Experiences, Common Intellectual Experiences, Learning Communities, Writing-Intensive Courses, Undergraduate Research, Diversity/Global Learning, Collaborative Assignments and Projects, Service Learning and Community-Based Learning, Internships, Capstone Courses and Projects.
Foreign Languages

The PLUS Task Force received a number of comments seeking to clarify the role that foreign languages might play in General Education.

The task force recognizes the importance of foreign language skills in General Education and contemporary society. It also wishes to clarify that Illinois Articulation Agreement codes for fourth-semester foreign language courses currently exist, and that such courses at NIU may be easily added to our General Education program as it currently stands, and therefore may participate in any designed General Education Pathway.

The Compatibility of Pathway Minors and Traditional Minors

The PLUS Task Force received a number of comments regarding the compatibility of Pathway minors and traditional minors, and wishes to clarify the function and student value for this minor to the recommended General Education program.

Students have the option to organize their required General Education courses into a Pathway focus or minor. Earning a Pathway focus or minor creates no additional course requirements to complete their General Education program. Therefore, students may simultaneously pursue a Pathway minor and a traditional minor without any additional credit load.

Pathway minors have the potential to augment the breadth and depth of knowledge that students achieve in major areas of study and traditional/interdisciplinary minors by allowing them to explore cross-disciplinary perspectives on themes related to, but outside of, majors and minors. Pathway minors may also help to direct students into traditional/interdisciplinary minors and majors.

Pathway minors complement traditional/interdisciplinary minors; no existing minor will be required to change to a Pathway minor. Any approved General Education course is invited to participate in a Pathway, but no existing General Education course will be required to participate in a Pathway at this time. Only new General Education courses will be required to participate in a Pathway.

The task force has proposed the following language in its final recommendations:

- The required minimum of 21 semester hours in Knowledge Domain studies cannot include more than two courses in any one department. (A course with an affiliated laboratory experience shall be counted as single course.)
- A maximum of two approved General Education courses in the student’s major department may be used to fulfill General Education or Pathway minor requirements.
- Any General Education Pathway course that counts towards a minor may also count towards a Pathway minor.

These requirements assure exposure to multiple disciplines, and create additional curricular flexibility in the baccalaureate program. Individual departments may not impose additional restrictions on the courses that their majors may apply to General Education.

Finally, the task force would also highlight the perceived value of the Pathway minor for students. In our student focus groups, the Pathway minor was one of the most attractive features of the PLUS model, and participation rates in the Chico State Pathways minor (a program the PLUS task force has been closely monitoring) are promising so far. Although speculative at this point, this feature may help NIU to attract more native freshman and to help students see the relevance of General Education.
Northern Illinois University is an equal opportunity institution and does not discriminate on the basis of race, color, religion, sex, age, marital status, national origin, disability, status based on the Victims' Economic Security and Safety Act (VESSA) or status as a disabled or Vietnam-era veteran. Further, the Constitution and Bylaws of Northern Illinois University provides for equal treatment regardless of political views or affiliation, and sexual orientation. Inquiries concerning application of Title IX, Section 504, and other statutes and regulations may be referred to the Affirmative Action and Diversity Resources Center, 1515 W. Lincoln Highway, DeKalb, IL 60115, telephone 815-753-1118. Printed by authority of the State of Illinois. G058 12/14