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FROM: Michael J. Kolb  
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RE: General Education Visioning Task Force Executive Summary

In preparation for your meeting with the General Education Visioning Task Force this Friday, December 13, 2013 at 1:00 p.m., attached is a copy of the Executive Summary for your review. The summary will be placed in the General Education materials for the HLC Resource Room for the upcoming site visit.

We look forward to your meeting with the Task Force.
GENERAL EDUCATION VISIONING TASK FORCE EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The General Education Visioning Task Force (GEVTF) was commissioned in January of 2013 and consists of 22 faculty, students, and staff representing stakeholders from six different colleges and a variety of shared-governance university committees. Over the last year we have:

- Engaged in an in-depth study of general education approaches at more than 20 institutions.
- Reviewed several reports and documents, including NIU's 2013 General Education Assessment Report, General Education Reform: Unseen Opportunities, and General Education Essentials.
- Administered a campus-wide student and faculty survey that resulted in responses from about 800 students and 400 faculty and instructors.
- Given 14 presentations on to stakeholders from six colleges, the library faculty, various shared-governance committees, and the Division of Student Affairs and Enrollment Management.
- Solicited responses from six colleges (and some departments) regarding their attitudes toward the existing general education program.
- Began the development of three conceptual models of general education reform for further analysis and vetting in the spring of 2014.

Several factors impel the GEVTF to reform NIU's General Education program:

- **Student Dissatisfaction and Disconnect.** The most common words used by those who participated in the GEVTF Student Survey to describe general education are "waste," "easy," "boring," "basic," "pointless." Only 8% of student response words were positive (compared to 34% negative and 57% neutral rates).
- **Declining Enrollments.** A 27% drop in general education course enrollments since 2003 compared to a concomitant drop in overall enrollment of 16%. Presumably students are taking a greater proportion of general education courses elsewhere.
- **Community Disengagement.** Five of the six colleges with undergraduate programs have a disproportionately small number of sections offered in the existing General Education program. As such, the program limits our strongest asset, the faculty, to educate in creative and synergistic ways.
- **Inflexibility.** The existing program does not allow many students across the university an expedient means of navigating the general education curriculum (see the 2013 General Education Assessment Report – Office of the Vice Provost).
- **Poor Assessment Practices.** It is impossible to judge the success of the existing general education program in enhancing student retention/persistence given that the summative assessment evidence is idiosyncratic and inconsistent at both the course level and the programmatic level (see the 2013 General Education Assessment Report – Office of the Vice Provost).

The GEVTF has concluded that general education reform is essential for improving student persistence and institutional educational quality, thus augmenting NIU's mission of enhancing student success. The
GEVTF has also concluded that any model of reform must integrate general education into the rest of the Baccalaureate program (majors & co-curricular) in more meaningful ways. National studies have demonstrated that certain pathways of instruction (e.g., first–to fourth–year, interdisciplinary emphases within/among courses, curricular/co-curricular, research, and high impact practices) improve student persistence/completion goals. Our integrative model should entail:

- **A Core Curriculum with Enhanced Writing Requirements.** Numerous national studies demonstrate that strong performance in certain first-year classes—primarily Mathematics and English—is a leading indicator of retention/persistence and student success. Enhanced writing requirements that continue after the Core were identified as a common thread amongst the solicited college responses.

- **Enhanced Quality of Instruction.** Student survey results indicate that this value is very important to them (ranked second of nine areas) and that NIU is better at delivering this service than community colleges (again ranked second of nine values). Enhancing quality may include a number of strategies, including smaller class sizes and/or highlighting faculty research.

- **A Broad Perspective.** General education should encourage academic breadth in specific domains of knowledge that cross-cut departments and colleges. This approach to general education coincides with NIU’s traditional practices, national trends of reform, and the existing definition of general education put forward by the Higher Learning Commission of the North Central Association of Colleges and Schools.

- **Flexibility.** Solicited college responses indicate a need for curriculum flexibility (NIU currently offers 144 general education courses compared to the median of 239 of 20 benchmarked programs).

Ultimately such a model would enhance the program’s attractiveness to both entering freshmen and transfers.

The GEVTF will continue the 2014 reform process by gauging public perceptions and incorporating feedback. Steps include: (1) presenting three possible models of general education to the university community at a public symposium on January 29th; (2) organizing a series of follow-up focus groups that include students, faculty, staff, alumni, and our community college stakeholders; and (3) conducting a campus-wide survey. **Our projected goal is to obtain feedback on all three models and develop final recommendations for public dissemination and entry into the curricular process in fall 2014.** However, the GEVTF has identified three key areas where near-term assistance will be necessary to successfully complete its mission in a timely fashion:

- **Publicity and Advertising.** Few students, faculty, or staff are aware of our mission. While we have tried to actively engage the community with the assistance of the Vice Provost’s Office, additional publicity and advertising will help us reach stakeholders and to make the timeline for reform transparent to the entire university community. A sense of “buy in” also will smooth the transition to whatever program is eventually put in place.

- **Focus Group Organization.** In order to properly engage the community, additional logistical support is necessary to host a critical mass of focus groups and analyze/summarize data trends.

- **Write-Up.** Support for report write-up during the summer of 2014 will be necessary if final public recommendations are due in the fall.