Proposal: Alternative Liberal Education Requirements Framework (and Associated Comments and Recommendations), from Bob Nowlan

Introduction

This proposed framework, or model, is intended entirely as a contribution toward helping us collectively achieve the best possible liberal education reform. I have absolutely no personal investment in it, none whatsoever. In fact, I was absolutely shocked (even horrified) when multiple colleagues separately and repeatedly recommended to me near the end of the fall 2011 semester that I devise such an alternative model and share it. I certainly am involved in far more than enough otherwise, ranging from work on two books to abundant community and campus service responsibilities, to my teaching (to which I always give great and indeed priority attention), such that I approached work on this task with considerable reluctance (to put it mildly). But Jean Pratt and Evan Weiher both encouraged me to develop such an alternative model, and share it, and so did both my present Department Chair, Carmen Manning, and her immediate predecessor, Jack Bushnell, as well as everyone within my Department, the Department of English, with whom I had the chance to communicate at length about liberal education reform, where it is at, and where they would like to see it go, here at UWEC. In fact, colleagues suggested I owed it to them to put something like this together and to share it. And others suggested that consideration of several possible models rather than just one often makes for clearer and easier decisions on matters of this import. But I do want to make emphatically clear I sincerely respect the work that others have been doing, long and hard, in multiple other committees, work groups, and miscellaneous formations concerned with generating ideas for, and approaches to, liberal education reform. Preparation and sharing of this framework is in no way intended as a negative judgment in relation to any of that work by any of those people. If this alternative proposal only helps us better clarify why we want to do something entirely different than everything it contains and proposes, it will, I hope, have served a useful purpose.

A. University-Wide Liberal Education Requirements Part One:

1. University Writing Requirement (Variable Courses and Variable Required Credits)

2. University Mathematics Requirement (Variable Courses and Variable Required Credits)

3. University Science Laboratory Requirement (Variable Courses and Variable Required Credits)

4. University Foreign Language Requirement (Variable Courses and Variable Required Credits)

Multiple possible classes will serve as means to fulfill each of these requirements. The kind of class, and the number of credits required, will depend upon the student’s qualifications, and prior relevant experiences, entering the university.
B. University-Wide Liberal Education Requirements Part Two:

1. Knowledge of Human Culture and the Natural World: 6 credits or equivalent
2. Critical and Creative Thinking: 6 credits or equivalent
3. Effective Communication: 6 credits or equivalent
4. Individual and Social Responsibility: 6 credits or equivalent
5. Respect for Diversity Among People: 6 credits or equivalent
6. Integrative Learning: 6 credits or equivalent

This equals a total of 36 credits (or the equivalent). Multiple classes, across multiple departments and programs (as well as multiple possible other kinds of educational experiences), may qualify for fulfilling each of the above requirements.

C. Elaboration:

1. This model will preserve fundamental distribution requirements in writing, mathematics, laboratory science, and foreign language. Beyond that, all students will be required to take 36 credits, 6 corresponding to each of our 6 liberal education learning goals, in addition to their major. They need not, by any means, each take all the same courses (or all the same other kinds of educational experiences) to satisfy this 36-credit set of requirements.

2. In the interim, pilot period (three years), all arts and sciences departments and programs would designate a certain limited number of courses (with the specific number to be determined) as, in each case, enabling outcomes aligned with no more than one of the above six liberal education learning goals. Throughout the first three years—the extent of the pilot period—assessment data would be collected, by means of course-embedded assessment and through other means, in relation to how well each course managed to achieve the outcomes with which it had been provisionally associated. Review of this data would be ongoing throughout the pilot period. At the end of the three years, review of the assessment data would lead to recommendations of which courses should maintain their association with a particular set of liberal education outcomes and which ones not. Those courses at that point earning this status would then be able to maintain it for five years before the next major review of assessment data collected over that subsequent five-year period. Each year (during the pilot period) a department or program could petition, once a year, to add or remove a limited number of courses from the total number the department or program designated for liberal education credit (in alignment with the outcomes associated with a single liberal education learning goal).
3. Again, students could take any courses (or pursue any equivalent experiences) officially designated as acceptable options to pursue in earning six credits (or the equivalent) for knowledge of human culture and the natural world. And they could do the same as well with courses (or other kinds of experiences) officially designated as acceptable options to pursue in earning six credits (or the equivalent) for critical and creative thinking, for effective communication, for individual and social responsibility, for respect for diversity among people, and for integrative learning. Students would all need to earn six credits or the equivalent in each of these six areas, but they would not need to take the same courses—in any of the six areas.

4. Advantages of this model:

a. This model is logically consistent with outcomes-based liberal education and eliminates messy compromises with a traditional distribution-based general education model while at the same time maintaining a fundamental set of limited, distribution-style requirements.

b. This model provides enhanced freedom and flexibility for students and faculty—as well as for departments and programs.

c. This model is consistently tightly interconnected with assessment.

d. This model allows for testing whether existing courses might be demonstrably able to achieve desired liberal education outcomes, and therefore does not simply dismiss the prospective value of what faculty and instructional academic staff have long been doing, and are doing, as completely irrelevant toward achieving desirable liberal education outcomes. It recognizes the problem is finding a way to assess, measure, and demonstrate the achievement of outcomes, not the non-existence of any.

D. Keys to effective implementation:

1. Making sure that we maintain broad, flexible, rigorous, and cutting-edge articulation of liberal education goals, and, especially, of liberal education outcomes. These outcomes must not be reductive, simplistic, and biased in favor of one subsection of the totality of arts and sciences disciplines over others. They also must not run counter to or ignore the most advanced and cutting edge intellectual work in the broad array of arts and sciences disciplines they aim to represent—including advanced and cutting edge intellectual work concerned with pedagogical theory and practice in each of these specific disciplines.

2. Determining how many courses each department and program can designate for liberal education credit during the pilot period. Determining whether each department and
program should be able to designate the same number or whether this should be weighted in terms of the size of the department or program—or according to some other factor (such as the array of disciplines represented within a single department or program [for example, the UWEC Department of English encompasses many ‘disciplines’, while those I myself am expert in—critical theory, cinema studies, and cultural studies—are often conceived, by practitioners, as multi- or trans-disciplinary fields and do not even represent major or minor ‘emphasis areas’ within our department], and/or the array of different kinds of liberal education goals departments and programs already regularly align themselves with). Determining how many courses each department and program should be able to petition for addition to or removal from its total available for liberal education credit during this pilot period represents another key to effective implementation as well.

3. Determining what specific kinds of course-embedded assessment practices will be used, as well as what other kinds of assessment practices will be used, in relation to outcomes aligned with each of the six goals, and for all courses designated as working to enable these outcomes. Determining how this assessment data will be analyzed and by whom. Determining what threshold to establish for maintaining liberal education designation after the pilot period.

4. Determining what array of courses will satisfy each of the fundamental distribution requirements and how to determine placement into which courses, for what amount of required credits, in each case.

E. Notes:

1. Again, as with the current ULEC proposal, all students majoring within all colleges would be required to earn the same array of 36 kinds of university-wide liberal education credits (or the equivalent) [while, as aforementioned, the specific courses that fit this array will vary from student to student] and no college could subtract from or add to this precise array of university-wide liberal education requirements.

2. I have not developed alternative revised draft liberal education learning outcomes as part of this proposal. Of course I believe doing so is crucially important, and I have received an enormous amount of feedback from colleagues about what they do and do not want to see in such outcomes. The reason why I have not done this work, myself, as part of this proposal, is because I conceive this proposal to work with the outcomes that are being developed elsewhere, and otherwise, by different individuals and groups. What I propose can work with multiple possible formulations of essential liberal education learning outcomes (aligned with our six liberal education learning goals). What’s more, my English Department colleague Jon Loomis (who serves on ULEC) has already been working to develop alternative revised liberal education learning outcomes, and I as well as many colleagues, within English and across campus, have shared ideas with Jon about what to formulate and propose. In this proposal of mine, right here, I
stipulate the kind of outcomes I contend will prove most successful, yet working to develop those is so important that I believe it must be conceived and approached as a separate task. My aim here with this proposal is to set forth a possible framework, a general direction, and a series of recommendations concerning the ‘spirit’ of liberal education reform at UWEC.

F. Final Comments:

1. This alternative model is designed simply to spark further discussion and reflection concerning what will best serve the interests and needs of our students and best realize our mission. It is also designed to take into account prominent initiatives in liberal education reform that have been transpiring for many years now as well as where we are at, and have been, as an institution (in addition to where we would like to go). I myself maintain abundant experience with liberal education, and with curricular design and pedagogical innovation (in the liberal arts). I have attempted to draw upon that experience in this proposal. Over thirty years ago now, back when I was a high school student, I won a State of Connecticut essay contest for a written speech I composed arguing for the priority value of liberal arts education. I chose to attend, as an undergraduate, the then consensus top-rated as well as most competitive liberal arts undergraduate institution in the country, Wesleyan University. Wesleyan offered a magnificent liberal arts education. As a graduate student at Syracuse University I was actively involved in dramatic curricular reform of the structure and requirements of both the English Department and the Writing Program. As a graduate student I participated in, and frequently organized and led, numerous work and study groups, research projects, forums and colloquia, and co- and team-teaching projects, all focused on pedagogical innovation, in areas of both theory and practice. Throughout all of my graduate courses, every single professor I worked with always insisted we make regular and extensive connections between every text and topic we studied and matters of pedagogy, curriculum, and relations between institution and community. As a graduate student instructor I was encouraged immediately to engage in intensive study and research of pedagogical theory and practice in the interest of developing my own distinct pedagogical theory and practice. I have been subsequently extensively involved in considerable work concerning curriculum reconception and redesign at Arizona State University, and, within the English Department, here at UWEC. I early on, while at Syracuse, started voluntarily teaching in the community, beyond teaching my assigned and paid classes on campus and I eventually organized and led a Free University in Syracuse. I have continued to engage in extensive pedagogical initiatives within the broader community, beyond the regular classes I am assigned and paid to teach, at every institution I have since taught. Now in my 27th year teaching at the university level I maintain a passionate commitment toward outstanding achievement in all of my classes, for all of my students, and am continually working, always, to find ways to improve, no matter how successful these classes turn out to be. My ultimate point in sharing all of the preceding is simply to use myself as one example in support of the following: I urge us, as we continue to proceed at this University with liberal education reform, to respect the talent, experience, and commitment of faculty working at this institution—and to do so, in particular, in how we devise and implement new approaches to liberal education. Don’t underestimate the excellence of our faculty, and of what we can and do represent and bring to bear. Engage us, consult us, work with us, and draw
upon our strengths in making this happen. Be positive and encouraging in working to persuade faculty, and in working to emphasize what liberal education reform will enable—for faculty as well as students, for all of us together—as much, and as far, as possible. Winning positive faculty support for liberal education reform is pivotal (and of course I am not referring here to the impossible task of persuading everyone) because faculty have a great deal to offer to the ultimate, concrete, tangible success of whatever direction we ultimately commit to follow concerning liberal education at UWEC. Connect what we want to do with what students want and need with what faculty can bring to bear and are excited about and interested in; if we do all three, we will achieve a winning combination. I stress these points because faculty and instructional academic staff feedback, to me, in discussing liberal education reform, has tended in this direction. We appreciate the difficult challenges we at UWEC (and across higher education, especially nominally still ‘public’ higher education) face today; we recognize and accept we cannot simply do what we have been doing as we have been previously doing it; and we understand and support the need to be more efficient, accountable, competitive, and innovative than ever before. But we nevertheless need to accomplish all of that change by drawing upon what we already do maintain and already can bring to bear as vital resources to enable this change to prove successful. Just as we always need to work with our students from where they are coming, as who they are, and as what they are about, even while attempting to help them grow and change, we need to do the same with faculty. Faculty are in fact capable of considerable flexibility, to be successful in the work we do all of the time this flexibility is absolutely necessary, and therefore we need to emphasize that it is indeed readily possible to connect what faculty already bring to bear, and already do, with where we aim to go in terms of whatever kind of liberal education reform we approve and seek to implement. We need to emphasize that our faculty, our current faculty, are capable of excelling in making the liberal education we offer our students all the more up-to-date, empowering, and transformative. And we need to emphasize that moving in this direction will, at least ultimately, be greatly enabling of how faculty experience what they do at this university, and of their place and contribution to this university.

2. In the course of working to put together this proposal, I not only communicated extensively with colleagues within my department (and many others), but also I searched out and read through how a consensus series of the top 30 undergraduate liberal arts colleges and universities in the US today conceive of, and articulate their commitment to, general—and liberal—education, on their college and university websites. I noted a number of common factors. Here are a few I recommend we strongly consider taking seriously into account:

a. Almost all of these institutions maintained far less elaborate and prescriptive requirements for ‘general education’ (or the equivalent) than we currently do, and these institutions also, almost all of them once again, likewise maintained less elaborate and prescriptive requirements for university-wide ‘liberal education’ than even the latest reform proposal from ULEC contains.

b. These institutions articulated their commitments to liberal education by connecting these with matters of mission and vision, and principle and value, not just goals and outcomes.
c. These institutions offered most often highly flexible kinds of university- or college- wide requirements, and these often were articulated in terms of how they made use of faculty strengths, and contributed to faculty achievements, as well as what they did for students.

d. Likely the most common, and reputedly successful, element of a university-wide series of liberal education requirements across these institutions was the first-year liberal arts seminar. Sometimes these kinds of classes were ‘bundled’ and sometimes not, but these were always special classes focused on precisely focused issues, themes, and other kinds of topics that directly encouraged faculty and students to work together to pursue liberal education goals, and to realize liberal education values. At Wesleyan, when I was an undergraduate, these courses as well as many other kinds of curricular, co-curricular, and indeed extra-curricular means were staple elements in fostering a comprehensive, rigorous, vibrant, and exciting liberal education experience for faculty and students. I knew almost all of the approximately 600 students in my graduating class at Wesleyan; not one expressed anything less than great appreciation for and great satisfaction with their educational experience at Wesleyan—even when, as was commonplace at Wesleyan, this often included challenging faculty, and especially administration, and indeed often quite ardently so. At my graduation ceremony, we, the graduating students, were engaged in protesting multiple issues, targeting the university administration, but our President nonetheless praised us for doing so, extolling us for living up to the spirit of what a Wesleyan education and of what Wesleyan students are all about, and I knew he meant this sincerely, because that was, definitely, the kind of institution Wesleyan was. I know people reading this will think that Wesleyan University and Wesleyan students enjoy considerable advantages versus UWEC and UWEC students, and that is certainly true (although I will mention here that throughout my time at Wesleyan I myself received financial aid to pay 2/3 of the total costs, while also working an average of 20 to 25 hours for pay every semester, as well as full-time during summer and winter breaks to pay an additional significant proportion of the remaining costs) but I firmly believe our students are equally deserving of this quality of education—and equally capable of excelling as part of it. We could do considerably worse than seek to provide a regional comprehensive public version of what institutions like Wesleyan offer, one that could rival what they provide, and at the same time do so considerably more economically.