WHAT’S NEW, DIFFERENT, AND BETTER ABOUT THE LIBERAL EDUCATION CORE APC IS PROPOSING VERSUS THE CURRENT GENERAL EDUCATION SYSTEM—Bob Nowlan

1. Simpler and more flexible

> Instead of course work in 5 categories and 21 subcategories, the new core requires a total of 15 to 19 experiences in direct relation to our official UWEC liberal education learning outcomes.

> Students will be able to count the same experience to satisfy more than one core requirement,

> The overarching purpose of each requirement is clear: to provide an intellectual foundation upon which to build in meeting each of the 11 liberal education learning outcomes over the course of the baccalaureate:

Liberal education = the core + the major + the secondary area of concentration + electives, with all components directly aligned with one or more of the same 11 university-wide liberal education learning outcomes.

> This means, moreover, that the ultimate objectives of the core are directly aligned with the ultimate objectives of the baccalaureate as a whole: realization of the 11 UWEC liberal education learning outcomes.

> Students will have more room to pursue more electives, more room to consider pursuing multiple primary and/or secondary areas of concentration, and more room to decide by what means they seek to realize the core requirements.

> The degree audit will make clear to students, and to faculty advisors, precisely what purpose each course or other experience serves, taken as part of the core, because the degree audit will be expressly articulated in terms of students taking courses and pursuing other kinds of experiences in direct relation to the 11 liberal education learning outcomes.

> And, even though the vast majority of experiences students will pursue for quite awhile to come are likely to take the form of courses, students will be able to count other kinds of experiences, in the form of other kinds of widely recognizable high-impact practices, as fulfilling core requirements, as well as courses.

> These can include student-faculty collaborative research, intensive and extensive educational immersion experiences, active participation in living-learning communities, community internships, and more.
2. **Outcomes-based as opposed to distribution-based**

> The new core is articulated in terms of what specifically students are learning rather than in terms of how much exposure they gain to a variety of disparate fields and disciplines.

[[Our current GE follows what is called a “distribution model,” in which students choose from a wide array of courses to meet minimum-credit requirements in several broad areas of the traditional liberal arts: the humanities and the arts, the social sciences, the natural sciences, and so on. As in all examples of the distribution model, the only outcome we can really be sure of is that students have encountered a great deal of breadth across disciplinary fields. No features directly encourage interdisciplinary perspectives, no measures directly determine how well disparate courses have fostered students’ mastery of critical, analytical, or quantitative thinking skills, and no direct effort helps students integrate the knowledge they have acquired from the separate liberal-arts areas. In other words, no single, overall, liberal program exists, *per se*, and certainly none is apparent to the students; instead, students by and large think in terms of a series of unrelated learning experiences that enable them to check off requirements, that they assume are mandated as a matter of tradition. In a nutshell, our distribution model emphasizes this distribution of credits taken by students as an end in itself, not what students should learn as a result of the courses, and other kinds of experiences, they pursue in the course of working toward their degree.]]

[[In contrast, the APC framework proposal presumes that mere breadth of exposure for its own sake is not the goal we should maintain for our liberal education core. The framework introduces several significant innovations that render it distinctly different from the distribution model. While students will still need to take courses (and engage in other learning experiences) from several broad areas of the traditional liberal arts, they will be expected to integrate their learning through requirements intentionally designed to make the integration happen. And while they will still acquire mastery of knowledge and methods from many different disciplinary approaches, we will be able to demonstrate that they have also developed their critical, analytical, and quantitative thinking skills, enhanced their ability to communicate, and broadened their understanding of civic, social, and cultural challenges and responsibilities appropriate to the increasingly diverse and global lives they will lead in the future. Another way of thinking about the new model is this: the distribution of credits across liberal arts areas is a likely consequence – but not an end in itself – of a program through which students achieve eleven essential learning outcomes.]]

> This University has been committed toward emphasizing an outcomes-based approach to undergraduate liberal education for years now; this core brings this commitment into practice.

> These are outcomes that we have approved, unanimously here in Senate last December, after extensive work among chairs and directors across all four colleges for the preceding half year as representing what we collectively seek to enable are students to know and to be able to do.
It is much more readily possible to assess how well courses and other kinds of experiences are contributing to meeting outcomes as part of this kind of core than is the case with the current general education system of requirements; this change enables us to be more responsive, accountable, and flexible in what we do—and in how we do it.

This kind of approach to learning makes clearer to students, parents, employers, legislators, community members, and others as well precisely why students are taking the courses, and pursuing the other kinds of experiences, that they are—what these offer them, what they can gain from them, and how they are related to each other as part of a comprehensive whole.

Influential research shows that outcomes-based learning has demonstrated significant advantages over distribution-based models in working with historically underrepresented and socially marginalized groups.

Outcomes-based learning follows our institution’s work for many years now as part of the American Association of Colleges and Universities, including in connection with its initiatives expressly focused on and emphasizing liberal arts education—AAC&U is strongly and fully committed toward promoting and fostering outcomes-based liberal education.

Outcomes-based does NOT mean the end of emphasis on learning within and through work in academic and intellectual disciplines; it means clarifying what we are seeking to enable through that means, and drawing stronger and more explicit connections across distinct fields and disciplines, enabling students to better make these connections themselves, and fostering ways that faculty working in disparate disciplines can directly collaborate in meeting common objectives across disciplines.

3. **Strong new emphasis on Integrative Learning, Race/Class/Gender/Sexuality Equity and Social Justice, and Global Learning**

UWEC has for years now accepted integrative learning as not only a fundamental goal, and outcome, of undergraduate liberal education, but also as a guiding principle underlying liberal education reform—and all of the liberal education we aim to enable.

[[Here’s a relevant quote from the AAC&U: “Fostering students’ abilities to integrate learning—across courses, over time, and between campus and community life—is one of the most important goals and challenges for higher education. Developing students’ capacities for integrative and applied learning is central to personal success, social responsibility, and civic engagement in today’s global society. Students face a rapidly changing and increasingly connected world where integrative and applied learning becomes not just a benefit . . . but a necessity.”]]
Integration is the very feature that our current General Education framework most glaringly lacks. When distribution models were first developed, it was assumed that students could integrate on their own; there is no proof that this was ever true; however, even if it was true for some students 40-50 years ago, it’s an assumption that fails the majority of our students today.

We now are able to identify those students who are most harmed: the very students many of us most want to help succeed—historically underserved students, including first-generation students, students from low income families, and students of color—students who have never maintained equal access to the benefits of public higher education. We have a duty to these students. The distribution model fails them. By foregrounding integrative learning in our liberal education core, we provide the component most needed for students’ success—all students’ success.

A long-standing and major criticism of our current general education system has been it does not help students draw meaningful connections among what they learn in different fields and disciplines, as it follows a ‘coverage’ or ‘inoculation’ model in which sheer exposure to a wide array of different disciplines, and in substantial credit numbers, is expected, in and of itself, to foster the habits of mind of a liberally educated person. But too many students deal with this as simply what is required of them, and don’t find what they learn in one area actively and directly amplified and reinforced—or challenged and complicated—in another. Integration is not intentional within the current general education system; with the new liberal education core proposal, integrative learning plays a direct and pivotal role.

Integrative learning helps students directly, consciously, and deliberately connect what they are learning in their academic studies with their life outside and beyond the classroom, and beyond their time enrolled as students here—as well as assists them in integrating what they learn in one academic and intellectual area with what they learn in others. Integrative learning helps what students learn in a single course, as part of a single field or discipline, stick, and not only that, but also grow and develop, as this learning in the one course is picked up and engaged directly in other courses, and other experiences, in other fields and other disciplines.

Integrative learning is one area where the new core places emphasis on fostering learning in direct alignment with values that we as a university maintain as fundamental. The same is true for all of the core requirements in relation to what we are now starting to identify as the responsibility liberal education learning outcomes. Students are challenged to develop abilities and to demonstrate achievements in relation to race, class, gender, and sexuality equity; global learning and global citizenship; and civic, social, and environmental learning and citizenship.
As a result, our students will learn how to become actively and thoughtfully engaged with issues of ethics and of social justice. Many fields of knowledge and many knowledge skills, represented by many different departments and disciplines, will converge upon and sustain success in realizing these responsibility outcomes.

Emphasis upon race, class, gender, and/or sexuality equity, global learning, and integrative learning can serve as marks of distinction—as signature dimensions of what makes UWEC undergraduate liberal education exceptional.

[[These are values our campus holds; we have already enshrined these values in our goals and outcomes; we need to manifest this commitment in our liberal education program.]]

[[We can think of doing so as a natural extension of continuous with a long-standing project, prominent in this country and many others, of working on behalf of the democratization of public higher education. Such education in global awareness and social responsibility has a practical value, of course, given the fact that our graduates will pursue careers in a society far more diverse than most of us grew up in. But it has a moral value as well, as strong as anything we have always honored in our study of the humanities, the arts, the social sciences and the natural sciences—to understand diverse human beings and their cultures as well as we can and as broadly as we can, while living up to our mission statement: “We foster in one another creativity, critical insight, empathy, and intellectual courage, the hallmarks of a transformative liberal education and the foundation for active citizenship and lifelong inquiry.”]]

At the same time, core requirements in each of these new ‘responsibility’ and ‘integration’ areas responds to pressing needs on this campus, which many students and faculty, have registered for many years—especially in relation to race, class, gender, and/or sexuality equity and global learning. Our university has been for many years committed, in word, toward aspiring for excellence in terms of equity, diversity, and inclusiveness, and in terms of global learning. Our new core proposal takes that commitment seriously and places it directly at the heart of the kind of education we aim to provide our undergraduate students.

4. **Finally**

It is easy to be resistant to a major new proposal, and it is easy to be cynical about it. But let us keep in mind that we will be periodically revisiting and revising our liberal education learning goals and outcomes, and, as a result, our core as well. Our current general education system is based on an institutional foundation, the local origins of which have by now long been largely forgotten, and has for a long time in fact steadily mushroomed by means of incremental add-ons and adjustments into a vast and incoherent mass that is only comfortable insofar as it is familiar. It is impossible simply to reform this system, even if the principles underlying its articulation were not by now so thoroughly dated and ineffectual.
The process of implementing the new liberal education core will provide abundant opportunity for faculty and staff across this campus to revisit, rethink, and refresh what we have been doing and are doing; to come up with many exciting new courses and other new kinds of meaningful learning experiences; and to flesh out this core—to give it shape and substance. The liberal education learning outcomes are themselves broadly and flexibly articulated; abundant opportunity exists for colleagues to work on many diverse ways of meeting them—as part of the new liberal education core, and throughout the entire liberal education program, beyond. Just last Friday, colleagues of mine in English discussed how our prospective new ‘critical studies in literature and culture’ emphasis area could readily come up with courses, and other kinds of experiences, to contribute to liberal education core requirements in relation to 9 out of the 11 university-wide liberal education learning outcomes; I expect the same opportunity exists for many if not most other departments, especially within Arts and Sciences—and we will have the opportunity to do this work together, working across departmental and disciplinary boundaries all the more readily and extensively than has been the case to date.