

*Reframing General Education*  
**University of Wisconsin System Proposal to  
AAC&U Institute on General Education  
May 30-June 4, 2008  
Minneapolis, MN**

The University of Wisconsin System is pleased to apply to participate in the inaugural **system track** at AAC&U's General Education Institute, to be held May 30-June 4, at the University of Minnesota. **The UW System's goal for the Institute is to develop a concrete plan for reframing general education across the UW System.** What does such a reframing mean? It means providing leadership at the system level in a manner that allows each UW institution to develop its own outcomes-based general education program that includes well-articulated assessment strategies and integration of general education into the goals of the baccalaureate degree. This reframing will not be curriculum-specific; it will not mandate specific courses or assessment practices. Rather, the goal is to develop a plan—with direct input from and in concert with the campuses—by which the UW System can support and guide each of its institutions toward an institution-specific, outcomes-based reframing of general education according to institutional mission, needs, student population, and local faculty control of the curriculum.

**Background**

The timing for the UW System's participation is propitious. In fall 2007, the UW System embarked upon strategic planning in concert with its fifteen institutions. The goal of the *UW System Strategic Framework to Advantage Wisconsin* is to set strategic directions for the UW System as a whole that will be complementary to individual institutional strategic plans. Coalescing around a set of action steps, the *Strategic Framework* will also provide the opportunity to leverage support for public higher education in the state of Wisconsin.

The first action step states that the UW System will *commit to a coherent set of learning outcomes for all UW baccalaureate graduates*. In other words, the UW System will articulate succinctly and clearly what its baccalaureate graduates ought to know and be able to do as competent citizens in a 21<sup>st</sup> century knowledge-based, globally competitive democracy. The baccalaureate learning outcomes commitment will use the AAC&U LEAP outcomes as the springboard for working with UW institutions—faculty, staff and students—as well as the citizens of Wisconsin. Announced by UW System President Kevin Reilly at the February 2008 Board of Regents meeting, this action step received enthusiastic support from the System's governing board. This was an important first step towards getting buy-in at the institutional level. It should be emphasized that while the commitment has been made at the system level, each UW institution will determine its own framework for implementation according to its campus culture and faculty "ownership" of the curriculum.

At the same time, the UW System has signed on to the Voluntary System of Accountability (VSA), the NASULGC- and AASCU-led project to provide greater

accountability for institutional performance—including student learning—to consumers and regulators of American public higher education. The VSA seeks to improve public understanding of how public colleges and universities operate, and to affirm the significance of the many diverse missions of U.S. higher education institutions. While several requirements of the VSA will be easy for the UW System to meet, the requirement to gather evidence of student learning through rigorous assessment and make it public will prove more challenging. The UW System views the VSA as an opportunity to develop better models of assessment of student learning and make them public. It is hoped that the VSA can be used in the service of providing the kinds of evidence needed to fulfill the newly announced commitment to the UW System's baccalaureate graduates.

Finally, like other public higher education systems, the UW System is facing greater political pressure to make transfer into its institutions as seamless as possible. This is true for students transferring into UW institutions from *outside* of the System, i.e., from Wisconsin's Technical College System, and from *within* the UW System, i.e., from one UW institution to another. The UW System has a strong record of facilitating and easing transfer for students into and among its institutions yet challenges remain, in particular in the area of the transferability of General Education courses.

This combination of internal commitment and the expectations of our external constituents make the timing perfect for the UW System to benefit from all that the AAC&U's General Education Institute has to offer.

## **Need**

Key to realizing the goals of the baccalaureate learning outcomes commitment—at the institutional level and, above all, for our students—will be reaching consensus on a coherent set of learning outcomes agreed upon by faculty across the UW System. A critical component of this will be the coordinated and thoughtful review of general education at each campus resulting in a framework for general education that is outcomes-based and articulates clearly what students ought to know and be able to do upon completion of their institution's general education program. As a part of that review, campuses will need to develop a clear understanding of how institutional general education programs will be integrated into the goals of the baccalaureate degree on each campus. These tasks will not be easy. AAC&U will be an invaluable partner as we develop a plan by which the UW System can provide leadership and add value to the reframing of general education across the System's distinct institutions.

Currently, the UW System has no consistent set of outcomes for general education. The efficacy of general education at our institutions varies greatly. Indeed, UW System institutions have a range of general education programs at different phases on the spectrum ranging from stagnation to reform. Several UW institutions have completed competency- and outcomes-based reform of general education resulting in innovative, thoughtful and integrated curricula. At the other end of the spectrum are general education programs that offer the more traditional menus of course offerings to students, who satisfy their requirements through any number of disparate and unrelated

classes. The Higher Learning Commission has identified general education as an area of continuing concern for several UW institutions in recent accreditation reviews.

Likewise, several Provosts, in concert with their deans and faculties, have identified their institution's general education programs as in need of reform. The UW System wants to provide coordinated leadership to its institutions as they work to develop coherent curricula and general education programs that are integrated into majors and the larger goals of the baccalaureate. There is also support among the Provosts to enhance the transferability of general education courses from one UW institution to another, although this support is not generally shared by campus faculties. One of the corollary results of the UW System's participation in the General Education Institute, we hope, would be to use the newly developed, outcomes-based systemwide framework for general education as a means to remove barriers to transfer. With agreed-upon outcomes embedded in individual campus general education curricula, we believe that campuses would be more able to honor the also outcomes-based general education courses from other UW institutions taken by students transferring in.

The UW System also has a record of excellence for developing high-impact teaching and learning practices. These high-impact practices exist, however, in pockets only. They tend not to be integrated throughout majors, colleges or institutions, let alone the entire System. The UW System needs help in developing a plan to reframe general education in a manner that includes within it the integration of high-impact teaching and learning practices, a coherent set of learning outcomes, and assessment strategies to provide evidence that students are achieving the goals of the baccalaureate learning outcomes commitment. We need a vision and an action plan that articulates clearly the role of general education in preparing students for 21<sup>st</sup>-century citizenship, and that we can offer to our institutions as a guiding framework for their own autonomous reform efforts.

The UW System would like to make general education reform a central piece of its LEAP work in Wisconsin. As mentioned above, there is keen interest on the part of the UW System's Regents for this work. We are just beginning to conduct the necessary discussion with faculty leadership on the baccalaureate learning outcomes commitment and the concomitant general education reframing, and we need to tread carefully in this territory. One of the UW System's greatest needs is for help in conducting that conversation in a manner that negotiates the tension between system-led (top-down) initiatives and faculty-driven (bottom-up) innovation and reform efforts. We know that none of these efforts can succeed without faculty buy-in. We believe AAC&U can help us with that negotiation, as it has in the past, in particular through the inspiration and motivation that AAC&U has always provided to institutions of higher education. One of AAC&U's many strengths has been its focus on the big picture but one accompanied by attention to the details of faculty work and changing student needs. Indeed, we are hopeful that, through the system track being developed for the General Education Institute, the UW System can collaborate with AAC&U on a model for developing system-guided reform efforts within the boundaries of what a system can and cannot do

in recognition of the faculty ownership of the curriculum and, hence, an institution's general education program.

While expressing interest in reform, UW System Provosts have also been very clear in their expression of what will be helpful and what will not be helpful in moving forward the reframing of general education throughout the System and within their particular institutional settings and cultures. The Provosts suggested the idea that the System team to the General Education Institute might serve as a think tank, one whose members can effectively motivate and charge faculty at their respective campuses to move forward institutional reform efforts. The reframing plan to be developed by the System team through its Institute attendance needs to balance the development of a guiding framework that can be adapted by each UW institution, with concrete action steps that participants can take back to their institutions.

We believe the System work delineated in this proposal will be strengthened by the four UW institutions that are planning to submit proposals to this year's General Education Institute. Collectively, these UW proposals speak to the System's commitment to reform general education and represent the opportunity for synergy across the entire System. Moreover, several other UW institutions have sent teams to the General Education Institute in the last few years. This collective participation provides fertile ground for the dynamic development of collaborative approaches to what are, as indicated above, some complex systemwide issues.

### **Institute Goals**

The UW System's primary goal for the AAC&U General Education Institute is to **develop a concrete plan for reframing general education across the UW System**. By the end of the Institute, the UW System expects to have a plan that includes the following components, adaptable by each UW institution according to institutional mission, identity, and faculty governance:

- A design or model for how UW institutions can develop their own general education programs that are outcomes-based and articulate clearly what students ought to know and be able to do as a result of completing their institution's general education program.
- A clear articulation of how institutions can integrate their general education programs into the goals of the baccalaureate degree.
- Clear and specific assessment strategies that institutions can implement to evaluate the individual student learning outcomes for general education, as well as institutional general education programs as a whole.
- Strategies for moving this reform work forward as a System and with individual campus faculties, governance groups, and leadership.
- Improved outcomes-based framework for transfer into UW System institutions (from both without and within) recognized and accepted throughout the System.

### **Team Characteristics**

The proposed UW System team will include multiple perspectives from a variety of institutional roles and identities. The team will include two individuals from UW

System Administration: Dr. Rebecca Karoff, Senior Academic Planner and Director of the UW System's LEAP initiative; and Dr. Larry Rubin, Assistant Vice President for Academic and Student Services and the UW System Ombudsman for Transfer Issues. Ten other individuals representing the UW institutions are currently being identified to join the team, including at least one, if not more, of the following: a provost and an associate provost; a Letters & Science dean; a faculty senate chair; faculty development leader; and an institutional assessment coordinator. The other major consideration which will determine the team's composition will be *type* of institution so that we end up with a variety of institutions, occupying different locations on the General Education spectrum ranging from recently reformed General Education programs to those which have identified themselves as needing to change. We also will ensure participation from the UW Colleges, the freshman-sophomore institution that offers General Education exclusively to its students. Finally, UW institutions have a diverse set of missions and serve a variety of student populations. We will make sure that the UW System team includes representatives from this latter vantage point as well.

### **Contributions**

The University of Wisconsin System would bring to the AAC&U General Education Institute its perspective as one of the pilot partners for the LEAP Campaign. As the System works to expand and refine its LEAP work throughout its institutions and the state of Wisconsin, we are mindful that while we have pioneered for AAC&U how to advocate for LEAP as a large state system, we have a lot of work ahead of us. In particular, we have a long way to go in the primary goal to make the teaching and learning of liberal education goals intentional among faculty, staff and students at all fourteen of our UW institutions. The President's newly announced baccalaureate learning outcomes commitment provides additional purpose and urgency to our LEAP work, in particular as it relates to the determination of the best path for leading our institutions to the successful implementation of that goal.

The UW System has a lot to offer AAC&U in its goal to lead and expand both the LEAP Campaign and general education reform from the level of single institutions to a system of institutions. In fact, it might be worth mentioning that in putting out the call for team participants to the Provosts, ten of the UW System's 14 institutions have expressed interest in participating and three Provosts have put their own names forward. As mentioned above, four UW institutions plan to submit their own campus proposals for the General Education Institute to AAC&U. While they have been reassured that each proposal will be evaluated on its own merits, they also realize that they will be competing with each other for admission. As we submit our System proposal, in complete understanding of the need for AAC&U to evaluate each proposal on its merits, we cannot help but reiterate the point that if the UW System were able to send a system team **and** four institutional teams to Minneapolis, that would be quite a critical mass for moving forward the reframing and reform of general education in Wisconsin.

We hope circumstances will permit us to join AAC&U in Minneapolis and look forward to partnering with AAC&U in determining the best models to achieve general education reform on the scale and scope of a large, public, multi-institutional system.