Liberal Education Revision: Why, What, and How
BSU Faculty Senate Update: February 3, 2014

Why are we here? What factors have brought us to this point?

Universities in general and Bemidji State University specifically are experiencing considerable pressures to change the way in which undergraduate education is accomplished. What are these pressures? Certainly, the cost of obtaining an undergraduate degree has skyrocketed for BSU students as Minnesota has reduced the percentage of the total costs covered by public funds. Shouldering a greater percentage of the college costs often means that students hold one or more jobs. It is not uncommon for full-time students to be half-time (or more) workers.

In addition to cost pressures, improving access has become a catchphrase and not just in Minnesota. But what does access mean? Is improving access by providing technology-based distance delivery options the answer? If distance delivery is at least part of the solution, is there a qualitative difference between the education received through one means of delivery or the other? Does improving access mean admitting all students who want to attend whether or not they are “college ready”? If improving access means allowing these students entrance, does a university like BSU owe these students mechanisms/structures/programs that will improve scholastic ability, improve retention, and help ensure graduation? Improving access likely also means increasingly diverse student bodies—with respect to race and ethnicity, with respect to age, and with respect to social class. If so, how might our university be more welcoming to these students?

At the same time as universities face cost and access pressures, they also face increased scrutiny from accrediting bodies, from parents, from legislatures, and from employers to prove that students are receiving the kind of education that will develop them as individuals at the same time as it prepares them to be employees and citizens in a global, fast-changing world. Certainly there are pressures even within the state of Minnesota (e.g., Charting the Future) for institutions of higher education to provide a more tailored education that has been dubbed “workforce development.” Yet, when asked, employers really don’t want students to be workforce ready in the narrowest sense of that term. In recent studies conducted by the AAC&U, employers mention wanting to hire students with critical thinking, communication, and problem-solving skills. They see these as more important than a major. In order to create future employees that are workforce ready in the broader sense of the term—promotable beyond the entry level—employers urge colleges and universities to place more emphasis on what AAC&U calls essential learning outcomes. These include science and technology; local and global diversity and intercultural competence; civic engagement; ethical decision making and a sense of personal and social responsibility; as well as intellectual and practical skills like written and oral communication, critical thinking and analytic reasoning, complex problem solving, teamwork skills in diverse groups, creativity and innovation, information literacy and quantitative reasoning.

Unique to state-funded higher education, Bemidji State University faces pressures to deliver a curriculum that meets the needs of the Minnesota Transfer Curriculum (MnTC). If a sending institution deems a particular course at one technical, community, or state university to meet the needs of the MnTC, other universities must as well. The exceptions to this rule are those courses taught by disciplines deemed to be more vocational in their orientation. Bemidji State University has chafed at the application of this rule. Yet, we know from the literature (and from our own experiences) that the MnTC cafeteria model of general education delivery has several flaws. There is no inherent unity or integration to the courses contained within it, and the overall curricula lacks a cohesive educational philosophy. Instead of showing how knowledge from different disciplines might add to or complement that from another, students are often left with a sense of fragmentation, of disconnectedness. Students also do not understand the importance of traditional liberal arts subject matter and don’t see how these courses are connected with their majors and careers. Finally, faculty often have very little desire to teach non-majors and low interest in connecting ideas with other fields of study (AAC&U, 1994:vi).
In its current form, the Minnesota Transfer Curriculum represents an old way of thinking about general education—“the old idea equate[s] general education with breadth, and, in an institution organized around academic departments, involve[s] a sampling of courses from the broad array of academic disciplines” (AAC&U, 1994:iii). In this old way of thinking, general education courses are often taught as a service to students in other areas of study, and students are advised to get their “Gen Ed requirements” out of the way so that they could get to the “more important” courses in their major. This structuring of general education was viewed as discredited back in 1994 when the AAC&U published “Strong Foundations: Twelve Principles for Effective General Education Programs,” and it has become even further discredited.

What are we considering?

In the face of the pressures addressed above, what is the function of general education, or liberal education as it is called on the Bemidji State University campus? What would be involved if we want to build a strong, and distinctive liberal/general education program that meets the needs of students, employers, and the worlds in which students will live? There has to be more than simply providing broad exposure with a few key foundational courses thrown in. Again, the AAC&U is helpful in identifying key programmatic factors. Students should

- Receive a generous orientation to the intellectual expectations, curricular rationale, and learning resources of the institution;
- Acquire specific skills of thought and expression, such as critical thinking and writing, that should be learned “across the curriculum” and imbedded within several courses;
- Learn about another culture and the diversity that exists within our own culture in terms of gender, race, ethnic background, class, age, and religion;
- Integrate ideas from across disciplines to illuminate interdisciplinary themes, issues, or social problems;
- Study some subjects—beyond their majors—at advanced, not just introductory levels;
- Have an opportunity near the end of their course of study to pull together their learning in a senior seminar or project; and
- Experience a coherent course of study, one that is more than the sum of its parts.

Distinctiveness might be accomplished through the creation of an integrated general education program that is connected to majors and to the unique environs within which Bemidji State University exists. Distinctiveness might also be accomplished through the more intentional incorporation of high-impact practices in single courses and through the connection of courses (see the attached “Guide to High-Impact Practices”).

How Will We Get From Where We Are to Where We Want to Go?

The Liberal Education Committee has met several times since receiving the formal charge including two mini-retreat moments during spring semester start-up. To date, we have examined the pressures facing universities and general education programs, reviewed important pedagogical and educational practices, and sought the inclusion of students as contributors to our committee efforts. Our current efforts are centered on revising the mission and goals of Bemidji State University’s Liberal Education Program and identifying preliminary components that we would like to include in the revised program. Before we go too much further, we would like to share our thoughts with you and get feedback. Toward that end, we will be making our thoughts broadly available and plan to hold sessions at which we get feedback from faculty, students, staff, and administrators. Our plan is to hold at least 2-3 sessions during the week of February 10-14. Other mechanisms will be put in place as a way to collect feedback.

Please watch for the invitation and join in the conversations!