TO: UCLL Members

FROM: Ken Prouty, Inventory Sub-Committee chair

RE: Report on Inventory project

This report is intended to summarize the work of the Inventory sub-committee for the 2010-2011 academic year. The sub-committee undertook a study of Liberal Learning Goals (LLGs) across the MSU community, with the intent of assessing the extent to which these goals are present in the curricula of various units. A summary of the work and findings of the sub-committee are included below.

Initial Studies

- The entry point into the study was in the form of a presentation to the UGAAD Small Group in November 2010. The Sub-committee was represented by Ken Prouty and Kirk Kidwell. The presentation was intended to inform the UGADD members of the purpose of the study, and our plans for future work. After the presentation, a discussion followed that provided valuable information and insight in the shaping of the sub-committee’s work. During this discussion, some UGADD members expressed concerns about the intent and scope of the project, mainly that this was something that was being “mandated” in terms of policy, and that the LLGs represented another administrative burden on top of their current issues (this was a theme that was stressed particularly forcefully by representatives of professional programs with exacting external certification standards). The members were assured that the intent of the sub-committee was simply to examine current practice and to enable units to begin thinking about these issues with an eye towards the upcoming NCA accreditation process. Members were informed that they would be contacted in early January 2011 to set up meetings between sub-committee members and individuals from the colleges.

Sample

- Initially the intent of this project was to undertake a comprehensive assessment of the LLGs at the unit level across campus. Given time constraints, it was decided that a small representative sample would be more feasible. Discussions were held in late fall and early spring to determine which units should be part of the sample. While entities outside the traditional academic structures (i.e., colleges) were considered, it was eventually decided to limit the study only to colleges at this point. Units were selected that represented a cross-section of academic perspectives and approaches, including core colleges, professional colleges, and one residential college. Respondents included associate deans/directors for the following units: Music (MUS), Business (BUS), Nursing (NURS), Arts and Letters (CAL), Natural Sciences (CNS), and Lyman Briggs (LBC). Meetings were intended to be held with Social Science (CSS), but were not scheduled in time to be included this report. In some cases, unit UCLL reps and interested faculty were also present, in addition to members of the sub-committee. Meetings were held in mid- to late-February and early March.
Questions

- Respondents were provided with a list of general questions that sought to gauge the extent to which the LLGs were present in curricular decisions at the unit level. The questions were provided to unit deans/directors during the UGADD meeting in November and were sent again in advance of the Feb./Mar. meetings. These questions were not necessarily answered point-by-point but were intended to initiate a general conversation about curricular practice. Based on these conversations, the following general conclusions were reached.

Incorporation of LLGs in Curriculum

- While nearly all respondents suggested that the LLGs are present in their curricula in some way, only CAL and LBC stated that the LLGs were utilized explicitly at the unit level, as part of unit-wide faculty and administrative conversations about curricular planning and assessment (though they are not explicitly utilized in syllabi across the colleges). As the report from LBC noted, the unit tries to “integrate a science education with a liberal arts experience.” This experience was notable in its specificity, which speaks to the unique nature and mission of the Residential Colleges in integrating disciplinary and liberal learning approaches. Among the traditional colleges, such specificity was not as evident, though CAL indicated that conversations about the LLGs have taken place amongst faculty and administration. No data was provided about specific examples of courses and faculty using the LLGs (save for IAH courses).

- Other units indicated that LLGs are not explicitly stated in syllabi and curricular planning. In most cases, respondents could point to examples of courses where LLGs might be present, though not directly employed. In MUS, for example, all undergraduate students take a course in ethnomusicology, where students are exposed to the study of music in cultural contexts. In NURS, entering students are required to participate in an exercise in which they use their own cultural backgrounds as a point of departure for developing a greater degree of cultural sensitivity in dealing with patients. In neither case are these activities linked explicitly to the LLGs, yet these activities clearly reflect many of the same principles.

- Similarly, few units reported that LLGs are explicitly incorporated into accreditation, review, or faculty development and assessment (most notably LBC), though accreditation and professional certification standards (see below) sometimes reflect similar ideals. LBC reported that the LLGs are central to curricular planning and development, while BUS indicated that curriculum development was moving to a place where it would be “more sensitive” to these ideas.

Assessing LLGs within Current Practice

- Most units reported that the LLGs are at least indirectly reflected in their curricula. BUS indicated that the general principles of the LLGs are “deeply embedded at all levels” of the undergraduate curriculum; Liberal Arts are conceptualized as one of three “legs” of the curriculum (the others being basic skills and the core business curriculum). With other units, elements of the LLGs might manifest themselves in common coursework among students. In MUS, for example, all
undergraduate students complete a common core curriculum that includes, among other things, coursework in music theory, in which historical and cultural understanding are major themes, and theory, where analysis of music is an important activity. In NURS, Effective Communication is embedded in nearly all curricular and practical activities. Other units indicated that tracking specific manifestations of the LLGs is more difficult; CNS, for example, indicated that identifying such practices within its curricula (which is largely de-centralized among various programs) is more difficult. While some units might teach courses that deal with, say, ethics or research-based writing, others may not. This, again, speaks to the breadth of experience across colleges with regard to curricula; while some units (MUS, NURS) have a common core curriculum for all undergraduate students, others (CAL, CNS) do not, making college-level assessment somewhat uneven.

- **In some cases, external standards (including accreditation) paralleled the LLGs.** In NURS, for example, accreditation standards include sensitivity to culture, communications skills, and other criteria that reflect principles embedded in the LLGs. In BUS, the LLGs are clearly aligned with professional standards in the field; BUS provided a list of desirable characteristics in the contemporary business world that track very closely to the principles of the LLGs. In other cases, connections between professional standards are less direct; in MUS, the accreditation standards for the National Association of Schools of Music (NASM) focus mainly on performance activities and facilities. NASM standards do, however, require a certain sequence of musicology and theory classes, in which many of the LLGs this can be assessed through coursework.

Clarity of LLGs Among Respondents

- **Respondents expressed varying degrees of understanding of the intent and purpose of specific LLGs.** In the meeting with CAL, respondents exhibited a high degree of awareness (which is understandable, given that the interim director of CISAH was one of the participants, and that CAL has been involved in IGS for many years). There was general agreement on the intent of Effective Communication and Cultural Understanding. In the former case, all respondents acknowledged the importance of written and oral communication (and in many cases, Tier II writing is embedded within majors). BUS, for example, is already looking towards increasing the effectiveness of its students’ oral communications skills, based in large part on feedback from employers who have hired MSU graduates. BUS likewise is placing more importance on its students’ abilities to work in diverse cultural settings; NURS expressed a similar sentiment, suggesting that the ability to understand and work with individuals of differing backgrounds and cultures is essential for success in the profession. In these cases, units are offering (or plan to offer) coursework and practical experiences that help to develop these skills.

- **Conversations about Analytical Thinking also tended to indicate that units understand the overall intent of the goal statement, though analytical thinking takes on different forms.** In MUS, for example, all students are exposed to analysis within the music theory curriculum; students must demonstrate an understanding of the mechanics of musical composition and performance through both coursework and, to an extent, in applied study. CNS, by its very nature, incorporates analysis of data, statistics and evidence derived from laboratory work. In BUS, student work with case studies, analyzing content to understand practices that are important in the business world.
Two LLGs that were less clear to respondents were Effective Citizenship and Integrated Reasoning. In the former case, some respondents expressed concern as to how “citizenship” is defined. One respondent indicated that she had “no idea” how the goal might be incorporated into the curriculum in her unit. MUS suggested the citizenship manifests itself in collaborative ensemble performance and outreach/engagement activities; at the same time, MUS had difficulty expressing how the goal as written might manifest itself in its curriculum. NURS, meanwhile, offers a course in Community Health Nursing, which involves public policy, ethics, and so forth. More than one respondent expressed the belief the Effective Citizenship, as currently explained in the goal statement, seems to be geared specifically to Social Sciences and seems to have little applicability within the major. For example, the goal statement’s wording with respect to governance was frequently cited as an area that is simply beyond the scope of their disciplines. There seems to be a lack of clear consensus about the intent and curricular applicability of this goal.

In the case of Integrated Reasoning, there was a noticeable lack of understanding of just what “integrated” means, particularly with respect to the integration of liberal arts and disciplinary studies. CNS, for example, indicated that most faculty and students in the unit are skeptical of how to fulfill this element of the goal in its current manifestation. Moreover, CNS and other units expressed concern that there seems to be little or no pedagogy concerning integration at the disciplinary level; it was suggested that many faculty, particularly in specialized non-humanities areas simply do not know how to do this. While there was agreement that this is a laudable goal, there is concern as to how specifically it will be achieved within current curricular frameworks. Operationalizing this at the program or classroom level was a major point of concern among respondents.

Recruitment and Advising

Only LBC indicated that the LLGs play a significant role in student advising, noting that the College “supports students in using specializations and double majors that promote integrated reasoning” and structures its advising in such a manner; similarly, LBC markets itself to potential students as “a liberal arts-based scientific education.” No other respondents indicated that the LLGs are used in either recruitment or advising in a significant way. In the former case, recruitment activities vary widely, but generally focus on the major programs themselves. In the case of advising, respondents were generally blunt in their assessment that advisors generally have served to help students choose courses that will allow them to graduate on time, as opposed to selecting courses that will reinforce the LLGs.

Other Considerations

Some units expressed frustration over transfer rules that are confusing to students, faculty and advisers. This was particularly true in the case of units that have higher-than-normal transfer-in rates (NURS, for example), and that students often cannot transfer in courses to fulfill IGS requirements.
Conclusions

- There is general agreement that the principles outlined in the LLGs are important for undergraduate students. No respondents expressed any real opposition to the general project that the committee has been engaged in over the last several years.

- A “one size fits all” approach to liberal learning will not work for every unit. This was something that was expressed by a few respondents, that what works for one unit simply will not work for another. There is probably no single approach that will meet all the curricular goals of every unit and still be sensitive to the LLGs. A unit such as LBC, for example, will by its very nature have the LLGs deeply embedded within its curriculum. But its approach to science is very different from CNS, whose programs are more specialized and professionally oriented.

- There is a good deal of liberal learning going on within majors, even if it is not explicitly linked to the LLGs. Nevertheless, some aspects of the LLGs seem to be embedded more deeply than others. Effective Communication, for example, can be seen in some form in nearly every unit, though specific manifestations vary. On the other hand, Effective Citizenship is much less common, implicitly or otherwise. For some units, the incorporation of global perspectives and related topics is something that they simply cannot envision making part of their coursework. More importantly, the notion of “integration” itself seems not to be agreed upon, either with respect to what it means or to how it is achieved. There was a fair amount of skepticism regarding the language concerning integrating major and IGS studies.

- There is an assumption that faculty will know how to teach the LLGs, but some respondents indicated this may not necessarily be the case. Throughout its tenure, the UCLL has often looked at exemplary case studies of highly motivated, effective curricular planners. These have, of course, been extremely important in shaping discussions of what an ideal liberal learning experience might look like. But they may not be so easily applied in every setting. Some respondents expressed concerns along these lines, that they simply may not be able to replicate these things in the same way in their programs.

- Some of the wording of the LLGs may need to be refined or nuanced. In conversations about Effective Citizenship, for example, some respondents were not convinced that they could meaningfully incorporate the principles of the goal as is currently written. Other respondents indicated that the wording of the Integrated Reasoning goal, particularly as relating to the integration of disciplinary and non-disciplinary perspectives, was not sufficiently clear.

Future Considerations

- The UCLL (or whatever takes its place), working with the Provost’s Office, will need to determine whether or not the LLGs will represent binding curricular policy at the College level.

- The study piloted here should be expanded to include not only the other colleges, but other elements of the campus community as well.

- These studies should be linked specifically to accreditation and learning outcomes that will be forthcoming for the next NCA review.
Wording on some of the LLG statement might need to be revisited to ensure that the goals and outcomes that are stated are 1) reflective of what the undergraduate curriculum does, 2) feasible to incorporate across the campus community, and 3) clearly understood by faculty, staff and students.

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