Universities accept many responsibilities in the creation, transmission, and application of knowledge. Nothing that we do as educators is more important than helping undergraduate students become effective learners as college students and throughout their careers. We can derive satisfaction from the fact that we take this responsibility seriously. The distinctive dimensions of the Essential Studies Program at the University of North Dakota, for example, are responsive to those needs at a systemic curricular level. Many of our faculty colleagues incorporate both innovative and time-tested techniques that have been proven to increase the learning capabilities of our students. Our Office of Instructional Development serves as a central hub for supporting and sharing insights into effective teaching.

Although we can derive satisfaction from knowing that we already do a great deal to carry out the undergraduate education portion of our institutional mission, that satisfaction cannot become complacency. Our experience shows us that learning styles and instructional techniques can sometimes fail to connect, and that the disconnect is not the result of shortcomings on the part of students or faculty. As we learn more about learning, we have an opportunity to add to our effectiveness in teaching.

The latest institutional effort to examine undergraduate learning and develop methods of increasing its effectiveness is the creation of an Undergraduate Learning Working Group. This faculty-initiated effort arose from informal conversations among a handful of faculty involved in assessment, essential studies, and instructional development. One of the impetuses for the conversations was national attention to a phenomenon of certain courses with unusually high levels of underperforming students.

When those conversations were brought to me, I offered to provide the support of the VPAA office to a project that would set ambitious but realistic goals to identify some best practices to be shared with our colleagues across campus. The success of the Undergraduate Learning Working Group can help to reinforce the identity of our university as caring about providing a superior undergraduate education. That identity can help us to recruit, retain, and graduate a student population who choose UND at least in part because of the confidence that they will participate in a learning process that is intentional and self-reflective.

The initial step was the designation of the people in these informal conversations as a steering committee to brainstorm among themselves and with me a range of options for forming a group and providing them with a charge that was both achievable and significant enough to attract participants who would be willing to add
this work to the already substantial contributions they were making to the success of the university. That steering committee consisted of Lisa Burger (Director, Student Success Center), Joan Hawthorne (Assistant Provost, Academic Affairs), Anne Kelsch (Director, Instructional Development), Dexter Perkins (Geology), and Tom Steen (Director, Essential Studies).

We worked during the summer on drafts refining a mission statement and a Provost’s charge for the Group. When we had arrived at a reasonable level of comfort with the direction in which the drafts were evolving, I shared the latest draft with the VPAA Academic Cabinet (one of the spinoffs of the Council of Deans being used this year in an experiment to devise more effective governance and deliberative structures) and brought back to the steering committee the valuable insights from the Deans.

With a charge in hand, our task became the identification and recruitment of co-chairs and members of the Working Group. We are fortunate that our choices for co-chairs, Brett Goodwin (Biology) and Ryan Zerr (Mathematics), agreed to serve in that capacity. With their additional input, we approached a small number of people across campus with requests to join the Group. In addition to the Steering Committee members and the co-chairs, the Undergraduate Learning Working Group consists of Elizabeth Bjerke (Aviation), Stephanie Christian (Nursing), Sally Dockter (Library), Woei Hung (Teaching & Learning), Michele Iiams (Mathematics), Alena Kubatova (Chemistry), Mary Monette (English/RAIN), Jeremiah Neubert (Mechanical Engineering), Patrick O’Neill (Economics), Martha Potvin (Dean, Arts & Sciences), and Rebecca Weaver-Hightower (English).

The Working Group’s charge is divided into five main areas, with suggested items that the Group could consider pursuing in each of the areas:

1) **Investigate the current situation at UND with respect to undergraduate learning**

Actions could include:
- examining UND data, e.g., D/F/W/I rates, NSSE survey results, etc.
- determine individuals, offices, and current practices for supporting students who are academically at risk or are experiencing academic difficulties
- identify effective learning practices in use at UND for possible application in other settings on campus
- explore the use of high-impact educational experiences (e.g., undergraduate research, study abroad, integrated studies) and their possible extension to more students
- review campus advising structures, usage patterns, and outcomes

2) **Identify best practices used at other institutions to improve undergraduate learning**

Actions could include:
- share lessons learned from collective reading of sources that offer a national context for undergraduate learning issues and strategies
- review best practices identified by researchers and organizations for improving undergraduate learning (e.g., AAC&U, Policy Center on the First Year)
- explore effective practices employed at other institutions

3) **Determine what additional information at UND would more fully inform efforts to improve undergraduate learning**

Actions could include:
- identify data to be examined for potential impact on undergraduate learning, e.g., initial course placement decisions, paid employment, extra-curricular activities, etc.
- correlate undergraduate learning outcomes with current enrollment in high impact and best practice experiences available at UND
- evaluate what additional student data are collectible and useful for assessing the academic and intellectual engagement of students both within and outside formal class settings

4) **Communicate observations and findings to the UND community**

Actions could include:
- informal roundtable discussions
- semi-annual progress reports on completed and projected activities
- open forum sessions to engage the campus community in the work of the group

5) **Develop action plans for implementation beginning no later than the 2011-2012 academic year.**

Actions could include:
- conduct small scale experimental projects for short-term use
- identify practices that could be put into place at UND with sufficient time for preparation
- estimate costs of implementing various practices
- identify external funding possibilities and position UND to seek external support as appropriate

The formal charge of the Working Group extends for eighteen months, into the summer of 2011. I’m grateful for the enthusiasm and energy that so many people are willing to devote to the work of enhancing the undergraduate learning experience, and look forward to the conversations sparked by this Group expanding across campus to include faculty, staff and students all working together to build on the solid foundation that is already in place.
University Writing Program Introduces Kathleen Vacek, Interim Coordinator

Anne Kelsch, Director of the Office of Instructional Development and the University Writing Program, would like to announce that Kathleen Vacek recently accepted the position of interim coordinator of the Writing Center for spring 2010. Kathleen earned a master’s degree in English from UND, where she taught composition as a GTA. She went on to serve in the Peace Corps as a University TEFL program volunteer in the former soviet republic of Georgia. Following her Peace Corps service, Kathleen was an academic advisor, first at Walden University and later at the University of Minnesota Twin Cities. She has taught in UND’s Joint Management Program at the University of Shanghai for Science and Technology and at the ELS Language Center at UND.

Kathleen has been a consultant in the Writing Center as an undergraduate, a graduate student, and a lecturer, and she is happy to continue serving the Center in her new role. In addition to writing and teaching, she also likes traveling and spending time outside—cycling, hiking, paddling, and skiing—with her husband, Joe Vacek.

JOIN A FACULTY STUDY SEMINAR

Two Faculty Study Seminars will be offered this spring. The seminars provide a means for faculty with common interests to learn more about a teaching-related topic. Each group meets four times a semester, at times mutually agreed to by participants, to read and discuss a teaching-related book provided by OID. The participant’s only obligation is to read and to show up for discussion. To sign up for a FSS, e-mail the facilitator noted below with your contact information (e-mail and phone) and a copy of your spring semester schedule (noting the times you cannot meet). You will be contacted once an initial meeting date is set.

Crossing the Finish Line: Completing College at America’s Public Universities by William Bowen, Matthew Chingos and Michael McPherson (Princeton University Press, 2009). America’s public universities enroll a high percentage of the college attending population—about two-thirds of all full-time students seeking B.A.’s and more than three-fourths of all students in four-year programs. Long revered for their dedication to equal opportunity and affordability, public universities like UND play a crucial role in building human capital. And yet less than 60 percent of the students entering four-year colleges today graduate. Bowen, Chingos and McPherson try to shed light on this reality by probing graduation rates at twenty-one flagship universities and four statewide systems of higher education. The conclusions are compelling. The President of the American Council on Education noted, "Crossing the Finish Line is a must-read for anyone concerned with the disturbing fact that Americans can no longer count on each generation being better educated than the last.”

If interested in this Faculty Study Seminar contact Joan Hawthorne at joan.hawthorne@und.edu or 7-4684.

Teaching What You Don’t Know, Therese Huston (Harvard University Press, 2009). Your graduate work was on bacterial evolution, but now you’re lecturing to 200 freshmen on primate social life. You’ve taught Kant for twenty years, but now you’re team-teaching a new course on “Ethics and the Internet.” The personality theorist retired and wasn’t replaced, so now you, the neuroscientist, have to teach the “Sexual Identity” course. Everyone in academia knows it and no one likes to admit it: faculty often have to teach courses in areas they don’t know very well. The challenges are even greater when students don’t share your cultural background, lifestyle, or assumptions about how to behave in a classroom. This practical book offers many creative strategies for dealing with typical problems. Encouraging faculty to think of themselves as learners rather than as experts, Huston points out that authority in the classroom doesn’t come only, or even mostly, from perfect knowledge.

If interested in this Faculty Study Seminar contact Anne Kelsch at anne.kelsch@und.edu or 7-4233.
On Teaching Lunch Seminar Series

Wed, Jan. 27 (12:00-1:00) Writing Letters of Recommendation When You Really Believe in the Candidate—and when you don’t (register by noon, Jan. 25)
Badlands Room

River Valley Room

Wed., March 10 (12:00-1:00) Thinking About Diversity in the Classroom (register by noon, March 8)
River Valley Room

Tues., April 6 (12:30-1:30) Grade Inflation: An Open Conversation (register by noon, April 1)
River Valley Room

Wed., April 28 (12:00-1:00) Innovative Approaches to the Graduate Curriculum (register by noon, April 26)
River Valley Room

Join us for these informal lunch-time discussion on teaching-related topics of interest to faculty in all disciplines. To register and reserve a lunch, please fill out the online registration form on the OID webpage (oid.und.edu)

Upcoming Deadlines

February 1  Models of Innovative & Best Practices in Teaching & Learning at UND Deadline (noon)
FIDC Grant Monthly Deadline (noon)

March 1  FIDC Summer Instructional Development Professorship Deadline (noon)
FIDC Online Summer Instructional Development Professorship Deadline (noon)
FIDC Grant Monthly Deadline (noon)

On Teaching is published six times a year as a service to UND faculty. OID Director: Anne Kelsch. OID/UWP Staff: Jeanne Boppre, Jana Hollands and Kathleen Vacek.