UPDATE ON THE UNDERGRADUATE LEARNING WORKING GROUP’S PLANS AND PROGRESS
BY BRETT GOODWIN (BIOLOGY) AND RYAN ZERR (MATH)

It would be reasonable to expect most undergraduate students entering UND to plan to graduate in four years. And this is what they do expect. Over the past five years when incoming freshman students have been asked this question, approximately 70% say they plan to graduate in four years, and fewer than 6% say they expect either to transfer or not graduate at all (UND, 2010).

The striking thing about these expectations is how likely they are to go unrealized. For instance recent results show that students in the 1999 entering cohort who enrolled at state flagship universities similar to UND had four- and six-year graduation rates of 33% and 66%, respectively (Bowen, Chingos, & McPherson, 2009). Things are not that different at UND. Although we might expect greater student success at UND based on our liberal-arts tradition, our status as a medium-sized public institution, our pride in providing quality advising and academic programs aimed at enabling student success, essentially the national level outcomes hold true at UND: 26% of the 2003 incoming freshman cohort obtained a baccalaureate degree in four years (23% at UND, 3% elsewhere), rising to 66% after six years (54% at UND, 12% elsewhere). And, after six years, 14% of that cohort had left college without earning any type of degree (College Portrait, 2010).

While the causes of this lack of student success are unclear, it is clear that UND cannot just sit by and allow the status quo to continue. To do so would not fully serve our undergraduate students, and will eventually undermine our reputation as a high quality teaching institution – to the detriment of enrollment.

Higher education should be about providing an academically challenging program that allows for deep and sustained learning; the type of learning that stretches students, teaches them things of lasting import, hones skills, and prepares them to enter life as thoughtful and reflective members of society well prepared to contribute to society and to continue to pursue life-long learning. While these ideas are harder to quantify than simple graduation rates there is some evidence that students at UND find their courses and programs of study less challenging than they had anticipated, at least in their freshman year (UND, 2009).

Last October, the Undergraduate Learning Working Group (ULWG) was struck by Provost LeBel to address these concerns and to explore ways that the institution could support and encourage excellence in undergraduate learning. The charge to the ULWG was to 1) Investigate the current situation at UND with respect to undergraduate learning; 2) Identify best practices used at other institutions to improve undergraduate learning; 3) Determine what additional information at UND would more fully inform efforts to improve undergraduate learning; 4) Communicate observations and findings to the UND community; and 5) Develop action plans for implementation beginning no later than the 2011-2012 academic year. The members of the ULWG are: Elizabeth Bjerke (Aviation), Lisa Burger (Director of the Student Success Center), Stephanie Christian (Nursing), Sally Dockter (Library), Brett Goodwin (Biology), Joan Hawthorne (Assistant Provost for Assessment and Achievement), Woei Hung (Teaching & Learning), Michele Iiams (Mathematics), Anne Kelsch (Director of the Office of Instructional Development), Alena
Kubatova (Chemistry), Mary Monette (English/RAIN), Jeremiah Neubert (Mechanical Engineering), Patrick O’Neill (Economics), Dexter Perkins (Geology), Martha Potvin (Dean of the College of Arts & Sciences), Tom Steen (Director of the Office of Essential Studies), Rebecca Weaver-Hightower (English), and Ryan Zerr (Mathematics).

The ULWG met 12 times this past academic year. Our first task was to whittle the broad charge down to a number of manageable topics. We began by reading broadly about undergraduate learning, discussing what we had read and sharing our own background knowledge and experiences. From there we divided into smaller groups to brainstorm a number of challenges to and opportunities for improving undergraduate learning at UND. Each subgroup brought their best and most interesting ideas to the entire ULWG. These ideas were discussed and eventually boiled down to the five topics we researched this past Spring semester. Those topics were: 1) investigating the factors which are likely to indicate academically at risk students with an eye toward what can be done to identify and ameliorate those risks; 2) investigating impediments to deep learning in students including the mismatch between faculty and student views of education, again with an eye to ameliorate such impediments to deep learning; 3) factors that lead to faculty resistance to change with a view toward determining how best to encourage changes aimed at improving student learning; 4) the potential for a first-year experience to help students transition from high school to university level academics; and 5) the effective use of early warning systems to nip academic issues in the bud.

While these are the ideas that have bubbled to the surface in the ULWG meetings, none of these are set in stone. The next phase of the ULWG work is to gather more information. We will be asking students, faculty and administrators for input and data on the five topics listed above and also on any other topics or issues that seem germane for the ULWG to investigate further. We expect to begin that process this Fall semester by mining data already gathered by the Office of Institutional Research and by surveying members of the university community.

We plan to follow up on the surveys with focus groups involving students, faculty and administrators. The members of the ULWG will be able to best suggest things that can be done to improve the climate for student learning if there is robust, thoughtful feedback from the entire university community. So please keep your eyes and ears open for chances to answer our surveys and contribute to our focus groups. The members of the ULWG are looking forward to hearing your comments and ideas.

References


On Teaching Seminars Feature “Online Tools for Teaching” Series

Please join us for these informal lunch-time discussions on teaching-related topics of interest to faculty in all disciplines. To attend, register and reserve a lunch, fill out the online form on the OID webpage. Registration deadlines are noted below and (unless otherwise indicated) all sessions take place in the River Valley Room of the Union. For additional information please contact Jana Hollands at 777-4998 or jana.hollands@und.edu **Seminars in the “Online Tools for Teaching” Series are indicated with an asterisk.**

**WHAT I WISH I HAD KNOWN BEFORE TEACHING MY FIRST ONLINE COURSE**

Wed., Sept. 15 from 12-1 (register by Sept.13)

**USING PROPOSALS & PRESENTATIONS TO GUIDE STUDENTS THROUGH THE RESEARCH WRITING PROCESS**

Tues., Oct. 12 from 12:30-1:30 (register by Sept. 8)

**USING ONLINE TOOLS TO ENHANCE & ASSESS STUDENT LEARNING**

Wed., Oct. 27 from 12-1 (register by Oct. 25)

**DEALING WITH STUDENT RESISTANCE TO LEARNING ABOUT INEQUALITY**

Tues., Nov. 9 from 12:30-1:30 (register by Nov. 5)

**ENGAGING STUDENTS IN AN ONLINE ENVIRONMENT**

Wed., Dec. 1 from 12-1 (register by Nov. 29)
**THE AFFECTIVE DOMAIN AND THE FIRST-YEAR EXPERIENCE**

BY DEXTER PERKINS (GEOLGY)

[As part of his work as a member of the Undergraduate Learning Working Group, Dr. Perkins attended the 29th Annual Conference on the First Year Experience. He notes, “I have long been interested in ways to improve student learning, and this conference gave me a lot to think about. I share some of my thoughts and reactions below.”]

Starting in 1948, Benjamin Bloom and coworkers (Bloom et al., 1956) developed a classification scheme for educational goals and objectives. Bloom and colleagues identified three “domains” (kinds of learning): the cognitive, the affective, and the psychomotor domains. The cognitive domain involves knowledge, and all kinds of thinking, from rote memorization to complex analysis and synthesis. The affective domain involves attitudes, motivations, feelings and emotions that may hinder or promote learning. The psychomotor domain involves physical/motor skills. The cognitive and affective domains have fundamental significance for student learning. The psychomotor domain, while perhaps important in laboratory settings, is overall less significant.

Although efforts to help students improve thinking skills are common, there has been much less attention given to the affective domain. Yet, the affective domain has been shown to have a large, perhaps the largest, influence on student learning. For example, Perry et al. (2007) showed a profound link between students’ feeling of “control” and learning. Robbins et al. (2004), Covington (2007), Pekrun (2007) and Zusho et al. (2007) demonstrated that student motivation often has a more significant influence on college student learning (reflected by grades and concept inventories) than does student ability (measured by standardized test results).

Many researchers have pointed out that experts and highly motivated students are self-regulated learners (Zimmerman, 1990; Butler and Winne, 1995; Ertmer and Newby, 1996; Winne and Perry, 2000; Boekaerts and Corno, 2005; Perry et al., 2006) and that the knowledge of when to use specific learning strategies often separates low and high performing students (Pintrich and DeGroot, 1990). Study skill and motivation also have a strong relationship with student class performance (Credé and Kuncel, 2008). Additionally, successful learners engage in metacognition (think about their own thinking) and are aware of their learning abilities. They believe that the effort spent to learn will pay dividends in the future.

The first year of college can be very difficult for students. Nearly a third of entering first year students do not make it to their sophomore year (Gardner and Siegel 2001). Because the first year is crucial and because student affect is so important, many colleges and universities have instituted first-year programs for incoming students (Upcraft et al., 1989). The idea is to help students develop relationships, foundation skills, attitudes, self-confidence and many other attributes that help them become interested, motivated and self-regulated learners. First-year programs grab students when they first set foot on campus – when, in principle, their minds are fertile and they have not had time to develop negative habits or bad thinking. Programs and interventions specifically designed to promote students’ affective development have been most successful at this crucial stage of student development.

Several papers, including a recent one by Barefoot (2000) have summarized the necessary characteristics for first-year programs to be successful. Most important is to help students develop a sense of belonging that involves interactions with classmates and with faculty. Activities must extend outside the classroom and become ways of living rather than classroom assignments. Additionally, student assessments before classes begin, and during the first semester, can be used to identify at-risk or struggling students – and must be followed by timely intervention. Although exceptions exist, most first-year initiatives fall into one of three categories: programmatic, advising/counseling, or pedagogical.

First-year seminars are key parts of most first-year programs (Henscheid, 2004). The seminars introduce students to university life, help them develop both requisite skills and a community of learners. First year seminars vary greatly. At some schools they are specific to one field or department, at others they are interdisciplinary. They may have one instructor or may be team-taught and, at some schools, one instructor comes from the Student Success Center (or equivalent office). Franklin et al. (2002) and others have found that students who complete a first-year seminar are much more likely to be successful in their classes and to continue on a 4-year path to graduation.

Many colleges have found learning communities to be another very successful kind of first year program (Levine, 1999). The communities vary among schools, but all involve a cohort of students taking more than one class together. The cohort may take a first year seminar together, or may be in more traditional classes. The extent to which the classes are linked depends on institution and design – the classes may be team-taught and intimately linked, or may be very independent. At some schools, learning communities meet in special sessions – perhaps one hour a week – that focus on discussion of thinking and learning strategies and philosophies, metacognition, and other holistic topics. Some learning communities are residence-hall based, but often they are not. The key is that, no matter how they are organized, students have peers who give support and with whom they share experiences.

First-year seminars, learning communities, and other programs such as service-learning can be transformative, helping students adjust to college life, develop good attitudes and habits, and develop academic skills and goals. Besides such programmatic initiatives, many institutions have also expanded their assessment,
counseling and advising. One approach is to assess students before they begin their first year. For example, some schools use an approach called StrengthsQuest (https://www.strengthsquest.com/contenl/23407/Release.aspx). Students complete assessments and then work with advisors to design programs to help them build on their learning strengths. Other assessment programs may take an opposite approach – identifying areas of needed improvement and focusing on ways to make improvements. In either case, the advising is proactive. At still other schools, the focus is on identifying students who are struggling in classes after they begin. Instead of just relying on the standard mid-term deficiency reports (that generally are sent out too late to do any good), many schools start tracking student progress early in the semester. The key to success is early intervention and, for best results, multiple interventions if needed.

Some small liberal arts colleges focus so much on helping students develop strong affective characteristics that they have thrown out anything resembling a traditional curriculum or structure. More typically, small schools require all students to take part in some sort of first year experience. Most larger institutions find it impractical to have such requirements because they lack needed resources – especially instructors. The problem is not just that the classes need to be taught, and are generally small. More significant is that instructors teaching first-year classes have to stop doing something else that is valued. So large public universities generally make such programs optional. Some exceptions, for example Indiana University-Purdue University Indianapolis (IUPUI), have huge programs and may offer more than 100 first-year classes in a semester.

Excellent instructors motivate and empower their students, poor ones do the opposite. So, some schools work with the individual instructors who teach first-year classes in an effort to improve instruction. This can be a daunting task, as traditional college-teachers are hard to retrain! For this reason, it seems that most institutions that care about the first-year experiences of their students prefer to focus on programmatic and advising/counseling initiatives – they can, at least initially, be implemented without dealing with recalcitrant faculty. For best results, however, the faculty must get involved and be active participants.

References


Meet the Faculty Instructional Development Committee (FIDC)

The Faculty Instructional Development Committee, elected by the University Senate, provides support for course and curriculum development that goes beyond the means of the individual faculty and academic units. The committee is responsible for all decisions having to do with FIDC Travel Grants and Materials/Software/Minor Equipment Grants, Developmental Leave Supplements, traditional and Online Summer Instructional Development Professorships, Summer Mini-Project Grants. It also advises the OID Director on other matters.

The members of the 2010-11 committee are: John Bridewell (Aviation), Matt Cavalli (Mechanical Engineering), Joan Hawthorne (Assistant Provost), Lynda Kenney (Technology), Robin Runge (Law), Tom Steen (Physical Education and Exercise Science/Essential Studies) and Kathy Sukalski (Biochemistry), chair. If you have questions about FIDC funding, contact any of the members for more information.

FIDC proposals are due to OID by noon on the 1st business day of the month. **Funding deadlines for fall 2010** are: September 1 (Wed.), October 1 (Fri.), November 1 (Mon.) and December 1 (Wed.). Deadlines for summer funding take place in the spring. You’ll find complete information on the OID website.

Faculty Writing Group Opportunity

This fall the University Writing Program will offer a semester-long writing group for faculty. The group is open to faculty in all disciplines, including those who might have participated in past groups. We will meet weekly to share our works in progress and collegial support in a workshop setting. Each week one faculty member offers a draft to be read by group members, who respond by asking questions, offering suggestions, and sharing their reactions as readers. Being part of a writing group is a great way to keep a writing project moving forward. You’ll have a deadline to meet, you’ll receive feedback, and you’ll see how other faculty writers are tackling their projects. Since the group is open to faculty across campus, you’ll also get an interdisciplinary perspective on your work. To sign up or for more information, contact Kathleen Vacek at kathleen.vacek@und.edu or 777-6381 by September 27.

Writing Center Reports Now Sent Via Email

The Writing Center will no longer send paper report forms to faculty. When a student requests that the instructor be notified of a session, a report will now be sent to the instructor’s email address. The report will come from writing.center@und.edu. We are excited about this improvement which will speed up the reporting process.

Please remind students that if they want a report sent to an instructor, they must request it at the time of the session and provide the instructor’s email address. It’s a good practice for students to bring their course syllabus along with their assignment sheet to the session.

JOIN US IN THE BLOGOSPHERE AT TEACHINGTHURSDAY.ORG

In collaboration with Bill Caraher (History), OID launched the Teaching Thursday blog in the spring of 2009. Over 11,000 hits later, we are pleased to report it is going strong. The goal of the blog is to provide another venue for campus-wide discussion of teaching. We accept contributions about teaching of all kinds, at all levels, and from all parts of the University community. Visit us at teachingthursday.org
Join a Faculty Study Seminar (FSS)

Faculty Study Seminars provide a means for faculty with common interests to learn more about a teaching-related topic. This fall the Office of Instructional Development will offer two. Each group meets four times a semester, at times mutually agreed to by participants, to read and discuss a teaching-related book (books provided by OID). Your 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 fall semester schedule (noting the times you cannot meet). You will be contacted once an initial meeting date is set. For more information about FSS groups, contact Anne Kelsch at anne.kelsch@und.edu or 777-4233.

Teaching for Understanding at University: Deep Approaches and Distinctive Ways of Thinking by Noel Entwistle. (Palgrave Macmillan, 2009).

Written for teachers across disciplines, Teaching for Understanding at University concentrates on how students reach a personal understanding of the subject they are studying. In the introduction Entwistle states that changes in the academic world mean that teachers “are facing problems for which agreed solutions can no longer be expected, and so we have to think for ourselves and adjust quickly to new conditions.” To facilitate that process, he offers “a way of thinking about how teaching affects learning” and “a range of concepts and principles that allow academics to think about pedagogic issues in a more precise way.” Ultimately, Entwistle’s aim is to encourage a “broad, integrative way of thinking,” a “deep understanding” not just focussed on the study topics, but on their implications for life in general. Covering academic understanding, teaching approaches, assessment methods and evaluation of teaching, the book provides a comprehensive introduction to the latest ideas on teaching and learning.

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


The fastest growing student population at UND is online. To meet this demand, more and more faculty are developing online courses and redeveloping face-to-face courses for online delivery. What is the best way to coach a writing assignment delivered online? How can you migrate your face-to-face teaching practices into an online environment? Scott Warnock draws on his experience teaching online writing courses to provide guidelines for managing online conversations, responding to students, and organizing course material. Warnock proposes that online writing instruction is more than just a trend; it offers faculty an opportunity to put composition theory and practice to work in their teaching. Instructors new to online teaching and experienced teachers looking to improve their practices will find useful ideas for teaching the writing components of an online course.

If interested in this Faculty Study Seminar contact Kathleen Vacek at kathleen.vacek@und.edu or 7-6381.