

# Academic Program External Review Report

Essential Studies, University of North Dakota, Fall 2024

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## Introduction

We want to start the report by thanking our hosts for an extremely well-organized, well-executed site visit. We want to thank Ireland and Karyn specifically for providing useful information and travel planning support well in advance of our visit as well as throughout our time at the University of North Dakota (UND). We experienced kindness, respect, and organic hospitality in our review process. Discussions of general education programs can often get heated, yet ‘it’s a bit annoying’ was probably the harshest language spoken and ‘MIRA’ was the only four letter word we heard!

**Charge:** The three external reviewers are each heavily involved with national work in general education through the Association of General and Liberal Studies (AGLS), serve as directors of general education programs at their home institutions, have presented and published on general education, and have conducted numerous external program reviews. They were charged with conducting an external review for the Essential Studies program at the University of North Dakota in the Fall of 2024.

**Process:** Once assembled, the team reviewed the institutional self-review report from 2024 as well as the internal review from 2014. We then met to discuss the on-site agenda and goals, and then conducted a packed two-day site visit that included meetings with faculty, advisors, students, leadership, and other gen ed partners and stakeholders to gather broad perspectives on the current state of the Essential Studies program at University of North Dakota. Afterward,

the team compiled all their notes, met in scheduled daily meetings to discuss key themes and findings, and finalized this report shared now with the UND community.

**Spoiler alert!** The Essential Studies program is a very good general education program! It provides students with opportunities to build the skills and explore the perspectives they will need for their career, to serve their communities and our democracy, and live a life worth living. There is a beginning, middle, and end. It aligns with the institutional mission for a liberal arts education and does it at scale. We found nearly unanimous agreement that the program is central to the unique and impactful UND education. As one stated ‘it’s our bread and butter.’

However, if a program is good, but no one hears about it (or can’t quickly make sense of it), does it make “the program” sound? The bones are good, but what will it take to reach its full potential? And with all the change in the world, the institution, and students over the past few years, can and will Essential Studies continue to evolve and deliver on its mission and goals in the future?

We hope this report provides an outsider’s perspective of the strengths and issues/challenges that emerged in our review and offers suggestions and recommendations to guide the university forward in continuously improving on the concept in an ever-changing higher education landscape.

## Context

The general education program doesn’t live in a vacuum. There are a number of external, university-level, and program-level challenges and issues that must be considered before making sense of the contents of this report and its recommendations.

### Global/National

The value of general education is a consistent seed for discussion across the nation. Because gen ed is the one shared academic experience of all students, it is often politicized and/or put under the microscope as perceptions of higher education and its purpose shift. Ongoing inflation and perceptions of an economic downturn lead many to think of higher ed only as job preparation rather than providing students with the tools for active participation in democracy, a better understanding of the world and their place in it, as well as a means for social mobility and career pursuits. In addition, students and their parents are greatly concerned with things like cost, time-to-degree, and return on investment for the college degree.

Shifts in technology and its pervasiveness in higher education following the pandemic, the rise of remote learning, and the proliferation of AI have all challenged us to look and look again at what it means to participate in the learning enterprise in an inclusive and ethical manner. These challenges have had an outsized impact on gen ed. The Zoomification of some courses, meetings, work modality, etc. has enhanced convenience of participation but hurt the sense of shared community and identity.

Our student populations and their preparation and abilities have changed, and we are tasked with providing relevant and inclusive programs that meet our students where they are and advance them to their career and life goals. Students (and even faculty/staff) may not be as engaged with campus events and activities. And students and their parents are pushing for greater focus on work/career readiness and academic credentialing to further treat higher education as a means to an end (a job).

## State Level

The University of North Dakota in Grand Forks serves as the flagship for the state system. As evidenced by the recent digital information literacy requirement, the Chancellor has a good deal of authority and oversight across the system. Since it was mentioned by multiple people, there are rumors that the state could also push to lower degree requirements from 120 to 90. Should this happen, it could have a strong impact on general education broadly across the state and the Essential Studies program specifically. The predicted 'enrollment cliff' across the state and nearby feeder regions causes worry that UND will have to compete harder with nearby institutions and widen their recruitment area.

## University Level

The university itself has experienced its own unique changes and stressors. The one challenge mentioned most often is the shift to an incentive-based budget model, which has a perceived impact on ES of increasing pressure on departments across the institution to participate in the program. Another common issue mentioned was the increase in transfer students and students bringing ever-increasing amounts of transfer credits from high school and other higher education institutions, which can stress the 'shared experience' of all students. Furthermore, the shift in advising structure has impacted the way students interact with the program.

Some other mentioned changes include the recent change in UND's research profile, where the hope is that this change will not shift priorities and energy away from the strong liberal arts identity and its focus on teaching and learning. There was a fairly recent Provost shuffle that impacted faculty morale and introduced confusion about shifting priorities and goals. In addition, there has been a small but noticeable shift from tenure-track to non-tenure track faculty. This shift in faculty make-up may not affect teaching quality, but "adjunctification" can impact university culture, morale, and perceived security and investment in teaching and learning.

Finally, there seems to be some energy and ongoing discussion around potential First-Year Experience (FYE) offerings at a wider scale. If implemented, these could be a part of ES or at least serve as a great place to lay the foundation for ES introduction and messaging. There is also a good deal of energy around experiential learning, another potential component or partner of the general education experience moving forward.

## General Education

According to AAC&U, the general education program serves as the one shared academic experience of all students at an institution, no matter their prior experience, major, or professional goals. It is hard to identify that one shared experience when students are transferring in a good deal of gen ed credits (either from AP/Dual Enrollment in high school or from other institutions in summer), and major requirements are increasing while stakeholders from across the spectrum push for shorter time-to-degree and lower educational costs.

The institution has invested a good deal in the support of Essential Studies since the prior internal review in 2014. It has greatly improved the website, advising, central leadership support, and has made several attempts at building a program assessment process. Most recently, the institution designed and has begun to fully implement a special emphasis on digital information literacy for all students, proof that the program can improve and evolve to respond to external pressures and student needs.

The twice failed job search for a full-time director for the program has greatly hindered a number of potential improvements and ongoing program assessment and engagement. With any luck (fingers crossed), the current search will be a successful one to supply the leadership and personpower to enact many of the recommendations in this report.

## Limitations of Report

Although we felt immersed in the world of Essential Studies during our review, there are limitations to this report that must be considered. We tried our best to get the hang of the university lingo, acronyms, and structures/policies, but we were only on site for a little over two days, and two of the three of us had never set foot in North Dakota. So we may have gotten something wrong (e.g. ‘Wait, who’s Sassy? And is there a magician on staff... why do I keep hearing Taa-Daa?’).

We were able to engage with numerous stakeholders across our jam-packed agenda, but we did get mixed levels of engagement, feedback, and experiences. We feel confident in our understanding of the program perceptions from advising, the dept/college leadership, student success, the ESC, the transfer team, and the Vice Provost team. But we are unclear (too little or no data) about program perceptions from students (n = 5), faculty at large (n = 15, plus committee), and upper leadership (i.e., Provost and President).

Despite these limitations, we hope the report will prove useful and serve as one piece of broader ongoing reflection and program evaluation to ensure continuous improvement for years to come.

**Note:** This report will NOT include specific recommendations about the details of your general education curriculum (e.g. remove X, add credit hours to Y, change scope of Z, etc.). Instead, it will provide recommendations for how to move forward with your own gen ed recommitment-reform-reimagination **process** with specific questions and tasks to consider

along the way. We also are not advocating that all of our suggestions should be implemented, but instead we provide a number of suggestions, knowing that the dedicated faculty, staff, and students at UND will select those suggestions that make the most sense for UND's mission, context, resources, and manpower over the short and long term.

## Essential Studies Strengths:

In this section, we will highlight the strengths of the program, its people, and its operations.

### 1. Enthusiasm for ES Program

The ES program has momentum and enthusiasm across various constituencies on campus. Engaged faculty and the dedicated committee have helped in creating, aligning and validating courses for approval and implementation. Collaborative units (Registrar, SASCE, Institutional Effectiveness, Advising, the librarians, etc.) continue to support the program and provide valuable, invested feedback for improvements.

Enthusiasm for the program was expressed by the students with whom we met, and they spoke of meaningful intersections of content and interdisciplinary lenses to classes, which they did not expect but which *incentivized them to take additional classes outside the major*. These comments certainly filled our broad liberal arts-loving hearts. Internships, study abroad, undergraduate research were talking points by various constituencies and provide potential for high impact practices (HIPs) in the ES program, particularly in later academic experiences.

### 2. Wide variety of courses offered and ability for courses to double-count

The transfer team, staff in SASCE, and students cited the wide selection of courses as a strength of the program, as it allows students to find courses that meet requirements, are of interest to them, and facilitate transfer equivalency. All of these attributes enhance the ability of students to graduate in a timely manner.

### 3. Strong faculty ownership of program

The faculty we interacted with throughout the site visit expressed a strong passion for, connection to, and ownership of the Essential Studies program. The members of the ES Committee meet often to conduct the rigorous validation and revalidation processes as a part of a strong shared governance. The design and implementation of the new Digital Information Literacy component served repeatedly as an example for how the faculty, staff, collaborative units (i.e., libraries, TTaDA), and administration could collaborate in a positive and meaningful way, even when an easier option was available (i.e., all students simply taking Intro to Computer Science).

#### **4. Advisors engaged and knowledgeable**

Although the advising support model has evolved in recent years, there is no doubt that the advisors at the University of North Dakota are committed to students, knowledgeable of the program and its complexities, and work hard every chance they get to remind students of the value of a liberal arts education and how college is about more than just career-preparation. They consistently point students to courses and options that could expand their horizons, push them from their comfort zone, or complement their major for a more holistic education. The new model allows for multiple touchpoints for students to get the support they need from day one to graduation, ensuring they do not fall through the cracks. The model is also paying off in reducing stress and bureaucracy as petitions have dropped significantly, making for a more seamless experience for students and advisors and cutting down on backend reviews by administration and the committee.

#### **5. Assessment of program**

Assessment of Essential Studies is well on its way to providing the program's various constituents with the data needed for substantial and effective continuous improvement of the program. There is a broad consensus among those with whom we spoke that programmatic assessment is a key component of continuous improvement and program enhancement. Program leaders have already learned from the first two assessment plans that were implemented, and based on that experience, they have developed a solid framework for assessment of the program moving forward.

ES has well-defined learning goals, rubrics for measuring student mastery of goals, a mechanism for communicating results to constituents, and a supportive approach through the Teaching Transformation & Development Academy (TTaDA) to bring faculty together to engage around effective teaching practices for the learning goal assessed in that cycle. Staff in Institutional Effectiveness & Accreditation are deeply committed to the success of the assessment and to the support of faculty, and they already have a well-articulated plan to improve assessment data collection and reporting, including a system through Blackboard that will reduce the workload on instructors.

#### **6. Central administrative support**

Central administrative support has made great strides in improving the infrastructure to support the program. The implementation of professional advising has greatly enhanced the Program's ability to convey to students the value and importance of ES and to ensure that students meet the requirements of the program efficiently and in a timely manner (e.g., the number of petitions for transfer courses has dropped considerably). Training of members of Student Academic Success & Career Engagement has resulted in clear and consistent messaging about the importance and value of ES.

#### **7. Flexible and dynamic model**

The program has been responsive to meeting student needs in offering varied modalities, and pedagogical approaches. For example, the Teagle Cornerstone work is a primer for creative cross-disciplinary, co-taught courses. The institution has also increased online course offerings to better accommodate student schedules and learning preferences.

## **8. History of continuous program improvement**

Folks involved with the program have shown a history of implementing recommendations and improving on the program (e.g., acting on 2014 external review). The US/Global requirement shift to Intercultural Knowledge was perceived as an improvement to delve into deeper world issues. We can also see the Digital Information Literacy efforts as improving on the program and responding to external mandates in a creative and timely fashion.

# Challenges & Recommendations

## **1. Inconsistent and lack of targeted messaging and communication**

Although we only spoke with a few students, they seemed to represent a theme of broad and inconsistent institutional awareness of the ES program. One student shared a genuine attachment to the program 'Don't change a thing about the program. It's perfect as it is', whereas another asked 'Um, what's Essential Studies?'

We recognized several potential reasons for this variation within and across stakeholder groups. First, the ES program, the biggest academic program at the institution, is not a meaningful part of university communication efforts for prospective or current students, faculty and staff, or external stakeholders (e.g., alumni, community members). For example, it is problematic if messaging from Admissions about Essential Studies centers on what can be waived or met elsewhere. Faculty, staff, advisors, and students should be well aware of the valuable experiences happening across the program.

Second, the nomenclature of the program is not doing it any favors. We recognize that the name 'Essential Studies' may be a very accurate, and even inspiring description. However, with increased transfer experience (both students and credit) and a goal of broadening prospective student recruitment beyond the region, the program name leads to confusion when folks try to compare it to other programs with more common descriptions (e.g., general education, core curriculum). In addition, when people do not remember 'breadth of knowledge' and 'special emphasis', it muddles the meaning and purpose of those central components. For example, advisors cannot afford to spend time in their brief interactions with students on deciphering the program and hunting down program information and tools, when they should be focused on the hard work of student guidance and development and messaging the importance and opportunity of Essential

Studies. There seems to be a lack of a shared vocabulary to discuss a complex but important program with internal and/or external stakeholders.

Third, the six learning goals are central to the program structure yet are hidden in many of the program communication and informational tools (e.g., website, advising tools, admissions tools), resulting instead in a default to simple credit requirements and enabling a checkbox mentality. Some spoke passionately and knowledgeably of the learning goals, whereas others were unaware of their existence.

### **Short-Term Recommendations:**

1. Consider a name change. A shift to simply 'general education' may not be ideal, but it would be great to have something more recognizable and consistent with how it is referred to nationally. Even a simple shift to the 'Essential General Education' program might go a long way. Alternatively, consider a name that points directly to the six learning goals (e.g., Skills for Success); this approach might help reduce the current perception that general education is something separate from, or perhaps in opposition to, the major. Many institutions incorporate their mascot into the name... sounds like that's a whole thing for UND, so not recommended in this case. But the name needs to be meaningful and useful. In addition, consider changing the component names (i.e., Breadth of Knowledge and Special Emphasis) to be more memorable and student-friendly. This renaming process can be a good exercise in engaging students, faculty, campus partners, and external constituents.
2. Design a picture and shared vision for what a University of North Dakota graduate should look like and how the program helps to meet that vision. Ideally, this image/diagram should both communicate the purpose and structure of the program while also tying it to the broader degree and educational experience (e.g., co-curricular, experiential learning) of all UND students.
3. Whether you change the names or not, the program, particularly its mission, purpose, value, and structure, needs to be amplified. A proper PR campaign should include student experiences and testimonials, alumni reflections and support, and faculty perspectives of how they are bringing their passions, interests, and innovative pedagogies to the program. These stories can seed admissions/recruitment efforts, populate the website for a more student-facing feel, and support advising outreach beyond in-person conversations. They should be inclusive of the increasingly diverse student body including adult learners, transfer students, and both career-minded and more exploratory students, regardless of where they are in their academic careers. Staff from university relations and admissions as well as faculty from communications and journalism are useful partners in this work. In addition, students from a variety of majors (e.g. journalism, media, English) can contribute videos, articles, and designs either as paid interns or through their ES or major courses.



4. The website is quite useful, particularly compared to many institutions that lack an online gen ed presence beyond a simple catalog. However, in addition to incorporating more student-facing materials in general, the website should a) place the learning goals front-and-center and b) serve as even more of a one-stop shop for information and advising tools. It sounds like some advisors have to go to multiple places to find the information they need, again turning a potential student development and passion-hunting endeavor into a logistical fishing exercise. Here is a good example of a gen ed website that serves diverse stakeholders: [True Blue Core program at MTSU](#) (MTSU has a large transfer and nontraditional student population).
5. In addition to the website, review any and all digital ES tools to ensure they are portraying the value and purpose of the program. Even if the faculty, recruiters, advisors, staff, and institutional leadership are all on the same page and doing the hard work of spreading the word face-to-face, all it takes to undermine all of these collective efforts is one email or advising tool that presents the program as a list of checkmarks to be collected as efficiently as possible. If students enter a course having only seen the title and a jargon-filled catalog description, instructors have to work extra hard to both express the value of the program broadly and the alignment of their course to the program principles and learning goals. This review should extend to the tools and messages utilized at high schools, feeder institutions, and state transfer communications. Again, communicating the value and components of the program is hard, particularly when students enter the institution with a preconceived, checkbox mentality.

#### **Long-Term and Ongoing Recommendations:**

1. Tell the ES story early and often. Students should be well aware of the purpose, value, and structure of the program before they arrive, should hear about the great opportunities and experiences in the program during their time at UND, and should continue to hear the great things happening in the program as alumni. These perspectives should also reach UND leadership, campus partners and staff, and the Grand Forks community and beyond. If folks are aware and supportive of the program, they are less likely to lampoon it when times get tough or budgets get tight.
2. This will be outlined again in another section, but the communication and engagement efforts should extend to the physical, in-person realm as well. It sounds like there was a past ES student showcase event that should certainly be relaunched as a means of celebrating and connecting around the great student-led and/or mentored work of students across ES (and particularly from the capstone).
3. Review the course descriptions of ES courses with the aim of enhancing the emphasis on relevance and value and the connection to the ES program, rather than solely the disciplinary concepts to be covered.

## 2. Perceived complexity of program

Nearly all constituents expressed the view that the program is 'complex', 'cumbersome', or 'confusing,' with multiple layers and labels that are not well understood by students and even some faculty and staff. The unclear relationships among learning goals, breadth of knowledge, and special emphases appear to introduce confusion and obscure the intent/purpose of the program. The broad category names, especially Special Emphasis, do not appear especially easy to remember, and we encountered several persons who struggled to recall the names.

The double-counting across the breadth of knowledge and special emphasis requirements was cited by all constituents, and faculty and advisors indicated that double-counting shifts students from seeking courses that are most beneficial to their academic and career goals to seeking courses that will reduce the number of courses needed and thus economize their time to completion. The hunt for double-counting courses appears to functionally limit course choice and to reduce the ability of students to explore outside their major or pursue their passions.

The requirement that students must take at least two courses from different departments to meet the Breadth of Knowledge requirements (except Communication) has a sound rationale (ensuring that students don't take all of their courses in an area from their own department) but adds increased complexity for students for those requirements that lie outside of their major.

Transfer students face some unique challenges. For example, there are 'hidden requirements' such as courses needing to devote one-third of the course to a special emphasis to count for that requirement. Transfer students may enroll in a course at their institution that appears to them to meet a special emphasis but may fall short of the one third threshold, given that the special emphasis is unique to UND and therefore unlikely to be met elsewhere.

### **Short-Term Recommendations:**

1. As mentioned elsewhere, make the learning goals front and center for the program and the connections between the requirements crystal clear. A diagram on the website that provides a graphical representation of the connections would be helpful, so that anyone (students, faculty, parents, the Provost, etc.) can quickly make sense of the program.
2. As mentioned elsewhere, consider renaming the two broad areas, especially the Special Emphasis category.
3. Consider breaking up some of the combined areas (e.g., humanities and fine arts) and just require students to take X credits of one and X of the other. This change might obviate the need to have the 'must come from two different departments' rule. If not, the very sound desire to ensure that students take

courses outside of their own departments/majors might be more straightforwardly enforced by a limit to the number of ES courses a student can complete within their department/majors.

4. Reconsider the currently quite confusing naming and structure related to the math/science/tech requirement being separate from the quantitative reasoning requirement.
5. To be more transfer friendly, reconsider whether special emphases are considered when conducting transfer petitions and instead focus only on the breadth of knowledge requirements. This exact change was made at Virginia Tech and improved course transferability without losing the soul of the program.
6. Advisors could use some better and more frequent training, particularly for new advisor onboarding. Consider training that instills the why of ES (e.g., having new advisors map requirements onto the NACE competencies and/or a relevant societal issue). Also, create a tool or database that includes in one place all of the ES information advisors need to do their job without having to go to multiple different sites and resources (e.g. student-friendly course description, pedagogy-leveraged, requirements it meets).

### **Long-Term and Ongoing Recommendations:**

1. Consider a simpler structure in which there are only two categories: one focused on skills (as the Learning Goals do), and the other focused on different disciplines (especially different epistemologies). If all courses are required to meet one goal/skill and one discipline/epistemology, then the issue of double counting disappears. See [Middle Tennessee State's TrueBlue Core](#) for an example.
2. Consider packaging the various components into more tangible mini-programs like the [GenEd certificates program at Northern Iowa University](#) or the [gen ed Pathways Minors at Virginia Tech](#) to bring transcriptable value to the experience.

### **3. Lack of broad faculty and advisor engagement and ownership**

As identified previously, there is a shared passion for Essential Studies. However, with the exception of the ES committee and the occasional advisor training, there seems to be few opportunities for various groups to engage with other program stakeholders. This leads to members of the gen ed community (e.g., faculty, advisors, program director, campus partners) working in isolation to make ES as good as it can be.

Even at the ES Committee, the one place cross-institutional ES collaboration is occurring, the members are spending a good majority on the bureaucracy of course validation and revalidation. In addition, multiple stakeholders shared that there may be a correlation between diminished perceived ownership of the program due to a potential underrepresentation of voting members by the entity, College of Arts and Sciences, that has the largest commitment to, and engagement with, ES. It also sounds like there is a

good deal of turnover on the committee that means, as one put it, 'you roll off just as you're getting the hang of the work.' And although advisors are knowledgeable of the program, they are spending too much time focused on the mere logistics and student progress while having to share helpful information through informal advising networks.

#### **Short-Term Recommendations:**

1. Develop opportunities for faculty, advisors, students, campus partners, and program leadership to gather regularly to celebrate the great stuff happening in the program (e.g., student showcase), work to continuously improve the program (assessment program evaluation efforts), share the latest updates and changes, share innovative teaching strategies and participate in professional development, and generally build the ES community. This engagement can come in the form of larger annual events, new member onboarding, and smaller informal opportunities (e.g., book clubs, workshops). Partnerships and collaborations with support units such as University Libraries, SASCE, and TTaDA can be fruitful.
2. To shore up the ES Committee work, we recommended that a more robust onboarding process occur for new members and that the membership be reviewed to ensure proper representation on the committee from the units that most serve the program.

#### **Long-Term and Ongoing Recommendations:**

1. Gather data to paint a picture of the typical (and not so typical) student experience in ES. Look at ES course enrollment data, data regarding the percentage of students in ES courses using the course for ES credit (rather than major or other requirements), and student perceptions from surveys. This data should be disaggregated to explore whether all students have access to the best the program has to offer.
2. To take it a step beyond simply offering the occasional workshop, an ES excellence in teaching certificate program could be developed and implemented. This certificate could provide opportunities for faculty to learn and share strategies with each other on broad topics as well as specific/targeted needs (e.g., teaching large and/or online classes, better course and program alignment to ES learning goals, bringing experiential learning to foundational courses, etc.). An excellence in ES advising certificate can also be created and implemented.
3. To foster both faculty investment and best practices, scout the service learning/project learning classes already existing for possible capstone opportunities, especially classes that work in teams/partners across interdisciplinary projects. Possibly design a different adoption process for the capstone in ES.

#### 4. Increased (and potentially misaligned) course offerings

A distributive model with sufficient course offerings can allow all students to pursue individual interest and passions and find courses that fit their schedules and degree plans. However, too many course offerings can be overwhelming to students as well as allow for perspectives, ways of disciplinary learning, and disciplinary experiences to become lost or avoided in class selection by students. In addition, inconsistencies in ES approvals and appeals sap the program of energy. While MIRA is driving the “class creation complex,” attention to alignment to learning goals and mission of the ES program would be better guidelines for class creation.

Some departments are looking for more restrictions on who can offer courses in particular areas, whereas others are looking for course offerings to be opened up. With so many students spread across so many courses, under-enrollment increases, elevating the cost of instruction. Having a large number of courses leads students to completing ES within their own major, diminishing their exposure to the skills and perspectives of other disciplines, and making a UND education less beneficial to students, who face the post-graduate world of changing careers, technological intersections, and shifting disciplinary realms (e.g., intersections of sciences, cultural studies).

##### **Short-Term Recommendations:**

1. Collecting and analyzing better disaggregated data could help with painting a more transparent picture of the actual student experience and journey through ES. That composite picture, though varying in some ways due to transfer/AP credit, petitions and waivers, retention and time to degree considerations, would be a useful companion to course offerings and the work done to validate, assess, and improve those courses as well as align them to the ES learning goals and mission.
2. There are many options for strengthening class offerings in service of ES: conducting a detailed quantitative analysis of enrollment data for course offerings, including total number of spaces for requirement, average and variance of sections of courses, average and variance in percent fill rates. Devise a model for the number of courses programs put forward each year; cap number of courses from programs, using enrollment data; strategize and incentivize opportunities for team teaching and experiential learning. Fill rates should be one of the metrics examined during revalidation.
3. Create a signature ES Capstone Course that offers experiences and opportunities to tie together all learning goals in the ES program (e.g., service learning course, project/team driven). These Capstone Courses could serve the needs of the Grand Forks region directly as do the [capstones at the University of the District of Columbia](#) or [City as Classroom Gen Ed Capstone at the University of Alabama at Birmingham](#).

4. Better advertise the process for courses to switch ES components if it makes more sense to do so between the revalidation of courses.

#### **Long-Term Recommendation:**

There was a suggestion from an attendee to potentially incorporate military, life, and work experience into ES course credit. If this initiative is to be considered, there will need to be a broad university engagement with this possibility with careful review of state and university policies, peer and aspirational institutional review, and data about potential implications of this change.

#### **5. Need to improve assessment and evaluation**

Although there are a number of clear strengths to the current assessment of ES (see Strengths section), improvements are needed to fully engage faculty. We note here the issues that we heard expressed by constituents, but a number of these are currently being addressed through strategies described to us by staff in Institutional Effectiveness & Accreditation that they will implement in the near future.

It appears that faculty are not fully aware of the current ES assessment system and its components. Some faculty indicated that they are not familiar with the rubrics, and others indicated a lack of connection with data collection and reporting. We did not get the sense that there is a smooth pathway from scoring of artifacts to distribution of results to the wider community such that they can make ongoing improvements.

The current system is quite correctly focussed on quantitative, direct assessment of mastery of outcomes, but some expressed a desire for qualitative data that might provide insights into the 'why' behind the quantitative data. Furthermore, no data are currently being gathered on the perceptions of representative samples of students and faculty about the strengths and weaknesses of the program. An ES presentation by students could strengthen the 'why' for all constituents. Scoring and awards could provide assessment data as well.

There are some significant issues with the current assessment through the SELF of student perceptions of the amount of progress they have made in a class with respect to the ES learning goals. Most importantly, the questions in the survey do not provide the actual learning goal (the long form), so it may be difficult for students to identify what they are rating about the course. Anecdotaly, a Fine Arts professor recounted that students in her class indicated that Quantitative Reasoning was a focus of her course, when the professor indicated that is officially not the case. Comparison of student perceptions of progress made toward a goal with direct measures of that progress can provide useful insights, but the utility of the comparison is compromised if the measure of perceptions is problematic.

Finally, greater communication between systems (e.g., Watermark, Blackboard) would improve data extraction.

### **Short-Term Recommendations:**

1. Either remove the student perception questions from the SELFI or include the full learning outcome in the question.
2. Improve assessment reporting to instructors and guidance for how to analyze and use the data. Guidance may be especially helpful for faculty in disciplines whose epistemologies are not based on empirical evidence, and these faculty could be supported in part by colleagues from disciplines whose scholarship aligns with the methodology of assessment (e.g., the social sciences).
3. Host assessment events that offer opportunities for faculty across each ES component to come together and review data, practice scoring and norming with rubrics, and make recommendations for improvements to program or assessment processes or assessment tools (e.g., rubrics, setup in the LMS). TaDaa could facilitate sessions on how to improve courses and assignments based on assessment data, as well as planning assessment for the next cycle.
4. Leverage any existing surveys (e.g., entering student surveys, surveys of graduates) and existing data collection methods (e.g., asking additional ES-specific questions on SELFI) to gather student perspectives of ES.
3. Conduct new, short surveys focused on student perceptions and perspectives. To increase response rates, such surveys could be conducted in a variety of courses during class time, especially capstone courses. The size of the UND undergraduate population allows a larger set of questions to be divided across subsamples of students so that each student answers only 1-3 questions, thereby reducing survey fatigue and increasing response rates.
4. Conduct surveys of faculty to better understand faculty perceptions and knowledge of the program, and use those results to design targeted faculty development with respect to Essential Studies. Use of direct measures of knowledge of the program (e.g., How many credits of x requirement must students complete?), along with perceptions of knowledge (How knowledgeable do you feel about...?) can provide insight into what additional training faculty may need. Collecting data on the faculty's departmental/college homes can help determine whether perceptions vary substantially across departments/colleges, allowing further tailoring of professional development to the needs of faculty.

### **Long-Term Recommendation:**

Develop qualitative methods (e.g. focus groups, open-ended survey questions) for exploring the *why* behind student and faculty perceptions of ES.

## 6. Lack of resources and budget

ES is the biggest academic program on the UND campus without a recurring and predictable budget. This lack of budget appears to affect the ability to support events, shared professional development, stipends for ES improvement work, and innovating existing and future ES courses (in terms of technology, team work, experiential opportunities).

Without a dedicated budget and resources, it will be difficult for the ES program to achieve long-term program support and adapt to changes in the student body, major programs, and innovations in technology and pedagogy. For example, if UND experienced an increased multilingual population, the ES program would need training and material support to accommodate and leverage that population for future growth of the university. In addition, without a dedicated budget and expanded resources, implementation of many of the recommendations of this review will be stymied.

### Short-Term Recommendations:

1. Partner with Teaching Development Center and Assessment to offer professional development based on assessment and qualitative survey responses from faculty.
2. Use Faculty Teaching Development grants and FIDC grants for cross-program teaching teams developing service-learning and team-based ES courses. Use FIDC grant money to send a team to AGLS or a similar conference for presentation and program improvement/teaching-related development.
3. Explore and incentivize faculty and students in the ES experience to seek external funding. The ES leadership team will need to search for external funding opportunities to support some emerging ideas and revisions (e.g., NSF, HHMI, Teagle, Mellon, Gates Foundation, disciplinary grants, local and regional grant agencies, etc.), provide professional development for, and communication to, a wide variety of stakeholders (e.g., advisors, faculty, and assessment team), and engage with general education discussions and work nationally. This proactive professionalism could include attending the [AGLS Constitute](#) and [gen ed anonymous support group](#), attending [AACU's CLASS conference](#), [Gen Ed Institute](#) (SUPER helpful for the core leadership team), and exploring their various [webinars/periodicals](#). Additional pedagogical work in general education as well as opportunities for ES faculty to publish in the scholarship of teaching and learning (SOTL) can be found in publications like the [Journal of General Education \(JGE\)](#).



**Long-Term Recommendation:**

Bringing the community into the work ES does through external partnerships (particularly in an ES Capstone course), establishing a cadre of grant-writing faculty (reflected and incentivized in faculty evaluations), and “legitimizing” ES through ES-specific professional development will help in establishing predictable and recurring aspects of the budget that directly benefit the program as well as incentivize community partners to provide resources that will benefit students and the program.

**7. Alignment of ES requirements with NDUS standards**

Currently, the requirements of ES are aligned with the North Dakota University System’s General Education Requirement Transfer Agreement (GERTA), which structures the general education learning outcomes around a set of academic disciplines. NDUS also allows institutions to adopt instead the Alternative General Education Program (AGEP), which structures the general education learning outcomes around a set of skills plus breadth of knowledge. The breadth of knowledge requirement of AGEP focuses not on disciplinary concepts, as does GERTA, but on an understanding of how different disciplines/epistemologies come to establish knowledge and the application of that knowledge, in an interdisciplinary fashion, to societal problems. Under GERTA, this type of application appears in a long list of basic components that may be included but are not required.

The 2024 Essential Studies Internal Report asked the question “Does the NDUS AGEP structure offer potential advantages/benefits that UND ES should further explore?” Our resounding answer is “Yes!”

**Long-Term Recommendation:**

Very seriously consider aligning ES with the NDUS AGEP instead of GERTA. Relative to GERTA, the categories of AGEP are more centered on skills and more closely aligned with the ES Learning Goals, and the flexibility with respect to credit hours for each requirement would provide UND the opportunity to better tailor its GenEd program to its students’ needs. Most importantly, AGEP will better prepare students to engage as citizens with the important societal problems that are in desperate need of solutions. The interdisciplinary approach of AGEP aligns better with the inherent need of any decision-making, whether personal, professional, or civic, to bring in multiple disciplinary perspectives, and no important societal issue can be solved by one discipline alone. Aligning ES with AGEP will better equip students for their future, and the increased relevance of AGEP to students’ lives will make the value of ES more apparent to students.

## Summary

The Essential Studies program has a lot going for it: dedicated and knowledgeable personnel to support it, a meaningful tradition and core of learning goals to guide it, and a history of continuous improvement to accommodate external pressures and student needs. It has 'good bones' so to speak.

The program (in all its complexity) is also one of the best kept academic secrets at the University of North Dakota, lacking a holistic communication plan, opportunities for broader community engagement, and alignment with broader gen ed standards and nomenclature. To many, ES is a list of disparate courses and their instructors, not a unified program.

A number of short-term and long-term recommendations have been provided to improve the program and strengthen the gen ed community participating in it. None of the recommendations are 'free' or easy, otherwise you'd probably be doing them already. Each will take time, people power, broad engagement, and/or direct funding and resources. The team needs to digest this report and develop a short-term and long-term plan and budget to move the program forward. Then institutional leadership must step up and provide the necessary support and resources to ensure the program can live it up to its full potential. With sufficient support, we are confident the institution can make gen ed at UND a signature academic experience for all graduates that can serve as an exemplar for other institutions.

It was a pleasure serving in this role, visiting and experiencing Essential Studies, even just for a couple of days. We are happy to answer any clarifying questions and would love to be kept in the loop regarding your progress. We wish you the best of luck with the journey.

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