

ACE Program Review Proposal for Realignment with UNL's Strategic Plan

UNL's Achievement-Centered Education (ACE) general education program was established in 2008 upon the recommendation for general education reform prioritized in UNL's 2005 strategic plan. Over the years, teams from UNL who have participated in workshops offered by the Higher Learning Commission (HLC) and the American Association of Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) have learned that our program's structure is well-founded and indeed is held by some to be a model of excellence in general education. Importantly, one of its greatest strengths is that its schedule of outcomes assessment includes a regularly scheduled review of the program as a whole, the second of which occurred during the 2021-22 academic year. This timing is especially opportune, permitting an alignment with the N2025 strategic plan as part of its central vision.

Responding to an open call extended through the Faculty Senate, two groups of faculty volunteers from across the university, spanning multiple disciplines, convened to address two specific areas of concern. First, while a noteworthy strength of ACE is that it clearly states *what* students should achieve through engagement with the program, it never clearly articulates *why*, or how these specific outcomes are meant to prepare students for active citizenship and lifelong learning. Aligned with the N2025's central goal that "...every person and every interaction matters", one group's review focused on how to help students better understand why each individual outcome is an important and valuable step on their educational journey.

Second, many faculty, students, staff, and administrators have recognized over the past several years that our social responsibility outcomes (ACE 8 and 9) do not sufficiently equip students to engage with current and emerging social issues. Aligned not only with the N2025's focus on new curricular and co-curricular emphasis on diversity and inclusion, but also guided by the university's Journey for Anti-Racism and Racial Equity and the Halualani & Associates' Diversity Benchmarking Report, a second group of faculty focused their efforts on reconfiguring the social responsibility outcomes to ensure that all undergraduate students engage with ethics, global issues, *and* human diversity.

As a result of these year-long efforts, the following proposals are presented for university-wide faculty approval:

- 1) To clearly articulate to students, faculty, advisors, and other stakeholders the value of each of our 10 student learning outcomes – that is, to make explicit why each matters as a fundamental part of our undergraduate education program regardless of major – and to incorporate student self-evaluation of outcome achievement into course-level ACE assessment.
- 2) To separate ACE 9 into its component parts – a) global awareness and b) human diversity – recognizing that our current social responsibility outcomes encompass three independent and separately critical learning outcomes.
- 3) To remove the current ACE 10 requirement, typically met with program-specific capstones and not *general* education, in order to retain the 30-credit hour limit to ACE.

Details, supporting information, and a proposed timeline follow, and an FAQ webpage will be posted at ace.unl.edu. Please direct questions to Patty Sollars, Director of Undergraduate Education Programs at patricia.sollars@unl.edu

Proposal 1:

To articulate how the achievement of each ACE outcome has impacts beyond the course content, and to incorporate student self-evaluation in the assessment process to help those impacts be realized.

As part of the 10-year review of the ACE program, we sent a survey to all faculty identified as having taught an ACE course from 2017 to the present, asking views on the purpose of general education and on the particular value of the outcome(s) they had taught. Within the 50+ responses received, a common vision of the value of general education emerged, including:

- "...to teach skills that are applicable across disciplines and to life in general."
- "expose students to a variety of disciplines and, in doing so, give them exposure to different ways of learning, thinking, and processing information. ...A general education gives them grounding in different ways to view and approach life."
- "...teaching them to understand principles of nature (science) and society (humanities, including the arts) that let them invent new and better ways of acting in the world, based on their understanding of those principles."

But all too often ACE requirements are viewed by students as nothing more than boxes to be checked off before graduation. We do little to ensure that students are aware of the larger purpose each outcome serves, extending beyond the specific course subject matter. Nor do we provide students with focused opportunities to reflect on how the varied approaches they encounter through ACE differ from one another, while together forming interrelated parts of their undergraduate foundation for lifelong learning.

This failure can have consequences for instructors as well. Without attention being paid to the student learning goals that extend beyond course content, assessment beyond the mastery of the subject matter is understandably viewed as an unnecessary and even meaningless burden. When, on the other hand, these goals are made clear at the beginning of the semester and made evident in at least one signature assignment for which students receive outcome-specific feedback, the assessment required to ensure that our general education program serves its purpose is readily at hand.

So, taking advantage of the opportunity for program-wide improvement provided by the 10-year review of ACE, faculty volunteers have met to consider how to help students and other stakeholders better understand why we believe these specific student learning outcomes are essential for all UNL undergraduates. Using their combined expertise together with examples taken from the general education programs of our Big 10 peers, the review teams for ACE outcomes 4 through 9 developed drafts of student-facing language, and suggested learning objectives and course elements aligned with these new statements. We are now proposing that this focus on the purpose of ACE be adopted throughout the program as follows:

- Student-facing language articulating the purpose of each of the ACE outcomes will expand upon the current outcome statements, to make it clear how and why each one matters.
 - With further faculty input as needed, the language developed by the faculty review teams will be included on the ACE website and in other published materials.
 - This student-facing outcome language will be included in an initial section of the syllabus (see Faculty Senate syllabus template) for each ACE-certified course and can be supplemented or explicated by the instructor as appropriate to their particular course. As required by the ACE governing documents, the syllabus should continue to let students know how students will be engaged throughout the course to gain the skills or knowledge needed, and which assignment(s) will provide them their best opportunity to demonstrate achievement of the outcome – both to the instructor and to themselves.
- As part of the course-level ACE assessment, students will be asked to provide a self-evaluation of their own level of outcome-related development attained through the course.

- The primary purpose of this self-evaluation is to provide students with a focused opportunity to reflect on the cognitive skills honed through their ACE courses, and ultimately to gain a clearer picture of the specific requirement as well as the purpose of general education as a whole.
- The self-evaluation may be a separate assignment near the end of the semester or may be appended to the signature assignment(s). While it should be a required element, grading of the self-evaluation should be completion only. When class size allows, an instructor's response to the self-evaluation adds to its value to students' learning.
- The information provided by the students' self-evaluation, together with the instructor's assessment of ACE outcome achievement on the designated assignment(s), should be used by the instructor to support continuous improvement in the general education aspects of their course. For example, does the more general purpose of the ACE outcome require greater clarity, or is there room to challenge students to even greater achievement?
- The student self-evaluation will not be used as an instructor evaluation and will only be used for improvement of the course or of the ACE outcome.
- To support the 5-year university-level ACE assessment, the following should be maintained by each unit offering ACE courses:
 - Copies of the course syllabi to indicate how the ACE outcome and signature assignment(s) are identified to students
 - Representative examples of student work on the signature assignment, either to indicate the range of student achievement, or to indicate evidence of improvement over time based on course adjustments.
 - Instructors' reflections on their assessment of outcome achievement and on the student self-evaluation responses, collected at least once each academic year. These may be individual instructors' semester-end reflections, or the group evaluation of multi-section courses.
 - Note: The ACE rubrics were designed in 2015 to aid assessment of the achievements designated for each outcome. While they will remain available for use by those who have found them beneficial, we will encourage all instructors to use them as guidance, adaptable to the specifications of the signature assignment of their course. Examples of modified rubrics should also be maintained as appropriate.

In order to ensure that the university's student-facing language is inclusive and best illustrates the opportunities students will have regardless of the ACE course taken, the Office of Undergraduate Education Programs will host outcome-specific conversations over the course of the 2022-23 academic year to further refine the current drafts of student facing language as needed. Units with multiple ACE courses in their subject area may want to adopt common statements for their courses to let students know how the outcome will be met within their area. In addition, ACE-specific prompts for student self-evaluation will be developed for each outcome, to which instructors may add any additional prompts that will add additional insight to aid in course improvements.

If approved, the components of this proposal should be implemented beginning with the Fall term of 2023. Allowing the 2023-24 academic year to serve as a transition year and to enable reflections on the impact of this proposal, the subsequent recertification schedule will be as follows:

2024-25: ACE 1, 2, and 3
 2025-26: ACE 4 and 6
 2026-27: ACE 5 and 7
 2027-28: ACE 8, 9 and 10
 2028-29: ACE Program Review

Proposal 2:

To separate ACE 9 into its component parts so that all undergraduates demonstrate achievements in both global awareness and knowledge of human diversity.

From its inception, the ACE program's ten student learning outcomes have been nested within four overarching goals: gaining essential skills, acquiring disciplinary knowledge, developing social responsibilities, and integrating these together in a scholarly or creative product. The third goal, encompassing outcomes ACE 8 and ACE 9, is stated as follows:

Exercise individual and social responsibilities through the study of ethical principles and reasoning, application of civic knowledge, interaction with diverse cultures, and engagement with global issues.

The 10-year review of the ACE Program provided an especially timely opportunity to address an aspect of the ACE program that increasingly has been a focus of concern, that is, whether our established focus on diversity is adequate in the context of the current demands of civic life and the impacts of expanding globalization. As the faculty review team considered ACE outcomes 8 and 9, they first analyzed the two outcome statements to evaluate how effectively they were allowing our students to meet the stated institutional objective. They discussed what was essential for our students to understand to meet the goals of individual and social responsibility, and how the needs of students have evolved since ACE was developed in 2007. They researched the general education programs of other institutions, including those of all our Big Ten peers, to gain additional perspectives on how best to prepare students for ethical and responsible citizenship through their general education requirements. They read and discussed the 2017 Diversity Benchmarking report conducted for UNL by Halualani & Associates and met with several of the co-leaders of the current Journey for Anti-Racism and Racial Equity. They carefully considered whether the three outcomes explicitly stated in ACE 8 and ACE 9 – ethics, global awareness, and knowledge of human diversity – might be able to be reconfigured in such a way that all three could be met within a six-credit-hour limit and realized that any such reconfiguration carried new significant limitations of its own.

The proposal that has resulted from their work is presented in the context of:

- A 2016 ad hoc committee charged by the Deans' Council to better highlight the interconnectedness of human diversity in our global world, a recommendation of which was that "as part of a future overall assessment and continuous improvement of the ACE program, consideration be given to separate human diversity and global awareness into separate outcomes."
- The 2017 Diversity Benchmarking that placed UNL in a mid-tier ranking because we lack "a meaningful and rigorous Diversity General Education program that requires a course in a least two different GE Diversity Depth Areas – one for U.S. Domestic Diversity and Structured Inequalities and the other for Global/International Diversity and Contexts" and "also due to the fact that this Diversity General Education curriculum is framed in a generalized for and does not provide enough exposure to domestic diversity and in contemporary contexts."
- The 2018 and later student-led initiatives, including the "Hate Will Never Win" rally, and the joint student- and faculty-senate efforts to increase diversity-related curricular requirements.
- The 2020 launch of the Journey to Anti-Racism and Racial Equity, which calls for the implementation of "a true U.S. racial/ethnic diversity requirement for all students as soon as possible."
- The N2025 Strategic Plan, including its strategy to "[e]stablish new curricular requirements for all students that emphasize diversity and inclusion.

- The ongoing work of Global Nebraska, whose strategy includes reimagining “what constitutes a global experience for our students” ... “because our world is increasingly interconnected and our students must be prepared to live, work, and serve in this new reality.”

Working within this framework, we are proposing that the student learning outcomes currently contained within ACE 9 should be divided into two separate outcomes. The first would focus on global issues, which may, among other things, be directly related to professional global impacts, or may include the current education abroad or military service ACE 9 waiver mechanisms. The second would focus on human diversity in the United States as indicated in the second and fourth bullet-points above.

Upon approval of this proposal, the units offering courses currently certified for ACE 9 will need to identify whether their course meets one or the other (or both) of these separate outcomes. This distribution would be initiated immediately upon approval of this proposal, in order to be established as soon as possible. As noted in Proposal 1, the recertification and assessment reporting for the new social responsibility outcomes would occur in the 2027-28 academic year.

Proposal 3:

To repurpose the ACE 10 outcome to accommodate the ACE 9 separation while retaining the 30-credit hour limit for UNL's general education requirement.

The institutional objective that guides the current ACE 10 outcome states that students should be able to:

Integrate these abilities and capabilities, adapting them to new settings, questions, and responsibilities.

with “these abilities” referring to the outcomes identified in ACE 1 through 9. The achievement that supports this objective, therefore, ought to involve students’ use of their essential skills (developed in ACE 1-3), taking cross- or multidisciplinary approaches (incorporating ACE 4-7) to issues that have bearing on individual and social responsibilities as a sort of pinnacle general education achievement. However, because the achievement described in the current ACE 10 statement also aligns well with the expectations that would be applied to a disciplinary capstone project, most current ACE 10 courses are serving as a disciplinary capstone without fully engaging the intended general education focus.

Capstone courses are recognized to be high-impact practices and their value to programs is clear, enabling assessment of student mastery within the discipline, and providing specific evidence of areas for improvement within the program. The well-designed courses currently certified for ACE 10 serve an important role both for regular program reviews and, where applicable, for accreditation by professional organizations. The same cannot be asserted about their role in our general education program: most, but not all, require students to use at least two of the three foundational skills developed in ACE 1-3; few ask students, whether individually or in groups, to employ deliberate, multidisciplinary approaches to their scholarly product; some, but not all, reinforce the ethical, cultural, or societal impacts of their subject matter. A common assessment that emerges from this capstone experience is that our students should acquire more practice developing their writing skills, but the most common solutions focus on the needs of “writing in the discipline.”

As the ACE 8/9 review team sought a solution for the need to separate ACE 9 into its component parts, they considered several options for how to accommodate the transition from three credit hours to the six required to meet both global awareness and human diversity. It is important to note that UNL's decision to limit the ACE program to the minimum number of required credit hours was firmly established in the program's founding (i.e., the Higher Learning Commission requires accredited institutions to include a minimum of 30 credit hours of general education in every bachelor's program offered) although the examination conducted by the faculty volunteers in the ACE 8/9 review team revealed that the general education programs offered by our Big 10 peer institutions average around 40 credit hours. Respecting that decision, and after considering and rejecting other options, the proposal resulting from the work of the ACE 8/9 review team is to remove the current ACE 10 requirement, which in its current form is poorly suited to general education, and to repurpose “ACE 10” for the crucial student learning outcome focused on the impacts of diversity in the US.

The rationale underlying this proposal is presented in the next document, affirmed by members of the ACE 8/9 review team whose names are included. A significant consideration in this proposal is that it does not preclude the appropriate recertification of a current ACE 10 course that meets any of the ACE other outcomes, most especially those that have been well-designed to reinforce the individual and social responsibility outcomes that would then be articulated in ACE 8 (ethical considerations), ACE 9 (global ramifications), or ACE 10 (impacts of human diversity).

Case for Changing Current ACE 10 (Capstone)

The faculty charged with reviewing the ACE 8 and 9 outcomes have had significant discussions on the current language and the intent of ethical and social responsibility outcomes, as well as relevance of these outcomes in today's world. We reaffirm the importance of UNL's general education program having a strong emphasis on ethical and social responsibility. In particular, the outcomes associated with global awareness and diversity need to be strengthened. We live in a world that is globally connected and increasingly polarized. Our students need to develop the capacity to "engage the other" to address complex local and global issues. Now more than ever, our students need to understand and engage human diversity.

We have also had to reconcile the past campus dialogue on the desire to split ACE 9 into two outcomes. For example, a faculty working group in 2016 was asked by the UNL Deans Council to consider modifications to the ACE 9 outcome and concluded that a future revision of the ACE program should consider separating the current ACE 9 outcome into two outcomes: one centered on global awareness/issues, and the other on human diversity. The UNL Commitment to Action from the co-leaders of UNL's journey for anti-racism and racial equity also identified a need to revise the ACE 9 outcome. The N2025 strategic plan calls for prioritizing and expanding inclusive excellence and diversity, and helping students foster innovative approaches to problem solving that requires diversity of perspectives, approaches, and backgrounds.

The faculty charged with reviewing ACE 8 and 9 outcomes reaffirms that the ACE program needs to provide an opportunity for students to engage with human diversity in both a domestic and global context, and this cannot be done in a single ACE outcome. Working within the constraints of the 30-credit approach to the ACE program, our proposal is to expand the ethical and social responsibility objective to three learning outcomes and redirect what is currently ACE 10 for this purpose.

So... why ACE 10? As a group, we recognize and affirm the importance of a disciplinary capstone course for a student's academic experience. We did not make this decision lightly. There was considerable dialogue and healthy debate. Our proposal to redirect ACE 10 towards the ethical and social responsibility outcomes is based on our discussions as to the appropriateness of a disciplinary capstone within a general education program. UNL's ACE general education program is built on student learning outcomes that answer the fundamental question, "What should all undergraduate students - irrespective of their majors and career aspirations - know or be able to do upon graduation?" In a broader context, general education provides an opportunity for us an institution to have a set of common outcomes for all our students that provide them with the capacity to engage in the world they live in. Currently, most ACE 10 courses are discipline-specific capstone experiences. This seems counter to the stated hallmarks of the ACE program which include:

"...providing broad exposure to multiple disciplines, complementing the major..."

Our group also reviewed general education programs of a variety of peer institutions and did not find a single instance where a disciplinary capstone was part of the general education program. We do acknowledge that there are certain degree programs that have limited flexibility in elective credits and are constrained by external accreditation requirements. Our proposal does not preclude degree programs from pursuing other ACE certifications for their current disciplinary capstone courses. In fact, given their emphasis on synthesis of knowledge, skills, and abilities, many current capstone courses are well-positioned to emphasize the proposed ethical and social responsibility outcomes. Furthermore, our proposal does not prevent the development of additional ACE certified courses within their programs.

The faculty charged with reviewing the ACE 8 and 9 outcomes unanimously believe that now is the time for change. We owe it to our students and to our stakeholders to have a general education program that has a stronger emphasis on ethical and social responsibility.

Co-signed by the following members of the ACE 8/9 review team:

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