

AASCU Campus Site Visit Team

University of Wisconsin – Stevens Point

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Campus Review Team:

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Executive Summary

University of Wisconsin – Stevens Point is a highly successful institution, marked by stable enrollments, relatively high graduation and retention rates, and a strong identity with its region. Faculty and students alike remarked on the campus culture of dedication to teaching and learning. This culture brings together faculty and staff in support of student learning, with a focus on a balance between liberal arts in its General Degree Requirements and both liberal arts majors and professional programs. Students are drawn to the University largely from the central Wisconsin region, although a growing number of students from the Milwaukee suburbs are identifying UWSP as a desirable alternative.

The American Association of State Colleges and Universities was invited to send an experienced team of faculty and administrators to examine the campus culture and academic program as they relate to student success and the position of the University as it faces the future. The visit was timed to precede the campus' accreditation visit from the Higher Learning Commission and to coincide with the self-study report's focus on teaching and learning. The reflective statement and focus questions provided by UWSP asked the Team to focus on the General Degree Requirements (GDR) and their effects on the educational experience of students. The Team was asked to attend to students' understanding of the requirements and the degree to which the GDR seem coherent and relevant to them.

The University of Wisconsin – Stevens Point stands at a critical juncture. The University of Wisconsin system has given its constituent universities a mandate to grow, lifting enrollment caps on the “cluster” (regional) universities. This pits UWSP against other cluster universities in the system, including some that are natural competitors. At the same time, the 18 – 25 year old population in central Wisconsin is shrinking, making the task of meeting enrollment goals more difficult.

In order to be competitive and to grow in this environment, it is important for UWSP to consider its ability to draw students from more non-traditional populations – transfer students, returning students, part time students, and others. Because of the size and complexity of the GDR, it has been placed front and center in this discussion. The GDR requires that UWSP undergraduates must take almost one half of the 120 credits required to graduate in general education (GDR), leaving few credits for electives or for minors that would complement students' majors.

Because of past governance actions, the distribution of GDR course offerings and student credit hours (SCH) has been codified, creating departmental “shares” of course offerings and the SCH that have long been believed to drive the internal allocation of resources. The mandate for “shares” of GDR credit hours was passed by the Faculty Senate years ago, making it extremely difficult for either the administration or the Faculty Senate to make changes. Faculty are concerned that any changes in the distribution of student credit hours will result in shifts of faculty lines from departments losing a share to those that gain. The result is a general education system that is frozen in time.

The Team noted that consideration of the GDR is especially important to UWSP because of the need for the University to adapt to a changing environment. The Team strongly recommends that for the University to address this changing environment, UWSP should:

- review its administrative structure to reduce redundancies and to sharpen its focus in critical areas such as recruitment, advising, and curricular change
- utilize appropriate data to create recruitment strategies that will counteract the shrinking regional population of 18 – 22 year olds
- continue to refine its vision and mission statements to focus on its distinctive programmatic and cultural dimensions
- build the necessary trust and collaboration between faculty and administration necessary to address the complex issues that have forestalled past efforts to revise the General Degree Requirements,
 - focusing on a more limited range of goals
 - focusing on transferable skills
 - developing effective assessments to be used in refining the program over time.

While the Team has a number of specific recommendations, it is also important to emphasize that the University of Wisconsin – Stevens Point is building on a very strong institutional profile. Its metrics in retention and graduation rates reflect the campus' culture that values student success and effective teaching.

Profile of the University of Wisconsin – Stevens Point

The University of Wisconsin at Stevens Point exhibits many characteristics of a successful institution. Its graduation rate of 57.9% (Education Trust, 2004 graduates) after six years is higher than many of its peer institutions, especially those in the University of Wisconsin system of “cluster” (regional) universities. Among the cluster universities, UWSP trails only UW – LaCrosse which has a six year graduation rate of 61.7%. The retention rate at UWSP of 79% of students who return for a second year is also quite strong.

Students at UWSP tend to come from the counties surrounding Stevens Point, drawing heavily from Marathon, Outagamie, Portage, and Wood counties. The University also attracts a significant number of students from Milwaukee County and neighboring Waukesha County as well as from Dane County (Madison). The counties that currently provide the greatest number of students at UWSP have stagnant to negative population growth. Marathon (Wausau), Portage (Stevens Point) and Wood (Marshfield) Counties all grew at rates well below the Wisconsin state average from 2000 to 2005.

Students who attend UWSP are primarily traditional students. Almost 84% of entering first year students are 19 years of age or younger. Slightly over half (54%) are female, and only 5% are underrepresented minorities. Nearly all of Stevens Point’s entering first year students attend the college full-time (99%).

UWSP does attract some transfer students, but the numbers are modest and relatively static. In fall 2000, 712 students transferred to UWSP; in fall 2005, the number was exactly the same. There are modest shifts in the source of students who transfer to Stevens Point, with the most dramatic increase coming from the Wisconsin Technical College system (103 in fall 2000 to 154 in fall 2005). UWSP is a “net importer” of transfer students at this time, with only 265 students transferring to other colleges from Stevens Point in 2005. Most of those went to UW-Madison (49), UW-Milwaukee (47) or UW-Oshkosh (39).

Liberal Arts and the Professions. The University of Wisconsin – Stevens Point has developed a programmatic profile that is closely linked with the interests and needs of the central Wisconsin region. The University is well known for its programs in environmental science and wildlife management. Many students with whom the Team spoke mentioned these programs as the primary reasons that they were drawn to UWSP. The other magnets for students at the University appear to be business, biology, education, and communication.

UWSP is characterized by a strong core of liberal arts and sciences which is reflected in an impressive range of majors, from the arts and sciences to well-known professional programs. The strong belief in the importance of liberal education also undergirds the University’s general education programs. The resulting General Degree Requirements (GDR) is a distinctive general education program that requires students to take either approximately 55 credits in GDR or to select very carefully those courses that permit

“double dipping” – satisfying more than one GDR requirement in a single course. These courses address thirteen areas that cover a variety of learning goals, including basic competencies (e.g., writing, mathematics), ways of knowing (e.g., science), content (e.g., history), and values (e.g., global cultures, wellness, environmental issues). It is fair to say that the program is both ambitious and diffused in its focus.

UWSP faculty members take great pride in the way the GDR reflects the high standards they set for their graduates and the degree to which those graduates are prepared with both breadth and depth. While some faculty members believe the extensive GDR requirements “rub against” majors such as paper science or environmental management that have substantial credit requirements as well as an experiential component, many others expressed the strong belief that students in professional programs such as business benefit from a substantial liberal arts core.

Faculty and Staff Engagement with Student Learning. Another distinctive strength of UWSP is its pervasive support of student learning. University faculty and staff regard teaching and learning as central to their mission. The UWSP accreditation self study is constructed around the theme “It’s about the learning.” Student success is often emblazoned on University publications. At UWSP, it is evident at every turn. Students affirm that they feel welcome on the campus and that faculty members are available to them for conversations and questions in and out of class. Faculty members think about teaching and how their students learn – and how they can improve the process.

A Student Centered Environment. The University also attends to issues of student success. Every two years, UWSP administers the National Survey of Student Engagement and has also begun to utilize the accompanying survey of faculty as well. The University has chosen to enhance the levels of active and collaborative learning as well as the level of intellectual challenge to students as ways of strengthening the undergraduate experience.

UWSP has also looked critically at its advising system, attempting to provide students with comprehensive advising throughout their lower division studies. Recognizing the gap between general advising and major advising, the University has begun to foster the national model of “advising as teaching”, building on the faculty’s strong culture of teaching as a priority. There is a council in which various centers for student advising can confer, although there is little active coordination among advising units.

Despite an intentional focus on advising and genuine commitment to student success throughout the University, the size and complexity of the GDR competes with the strong and successful majors at UWSP. Students in many majors have very few credits to devote to electives or to the possibility of changing majors, placing great responsibility on the decentralized advising system at the University.

The cooperative relationship between Student Affairs and Academic Affairs provides a supportive student environment through a strong Student Government Association, a variety of co-curricular activities, as well as tutoring in a variety of venues for students.

Issues on the Horizon for UWSP

There are several issues that UWSP must face in the near future, each of which holds both opportunities and challenges for the University:

- System mandate for growth
- Recruitment of non-traditional undergraduates
- General Degree Requirements
- Accreditation visit from the Higher Learning Commission.
- Administratively parallel planning and program structure

System Mandate for Growth. The Governor of Wisconsin has initiated a plan for growth in the percentage of the adult population of Wisconsin with at least a baccalaureate degree. In order to spur economic growth, particularly in technology-intensive areas, the Governor has asked the University of Wisconsin system to encourage growth through its institutions of higher education – community colleges, two year colleges, and the “cluster” (regional) universities. The Wisconsin System has responded by setting targets through its accountability system. Perhaps of greater importance is the System’s action to remove the enrollment caps from the regional universities to complement the mandate for growth. It is expected that the result will be increased levels of competition for new students.

Who are those new students? UWSP student profile reflects a largely traditional undergraduate student population – incoming first year students who come to the University directly from high school. In order to reach enrollment goals and to conform to the state system’s desire that transfer be more seamless, it is very likely that UWSP will find it desirable to attract more transfer students as well as students who may be either returning to college or coming for the first time as somewhat older adults. This means that UWSP must position itself to be competitive in attracting these students. This leads to two additional issues on the horizon.

Recruitment of Non-Traditional Students. Demographic changes in central Wisconsin combined with a more competitive landscape of public higher education in Wisconsin will challenge UWSP to attain its enrollment goals. Currently, the University relies on a traditional population and its strong reputation in the region to attract students. As noted earlier, this has been an effective strategy which has resulted in capable students drawn by UWSP’s strong reputation and attractive programs. As competition increases for a declining pool of students, however, it will be necessary to develop a more coordinated and data-driven recruitment strategy.

Currently, UWSP is a campus with programs designed and scheduled for full time students who have recently left high school to attend the University. Its residence halls provide housing and co-curricular programs. Its largely day-time schedule is not designed to meet the needs of students who must work at jobs not flexible enough to accommodate a day-time student’s schedule. The campus projects an environment

welcoming to young, traditional students but one that is not as well prepared for non-traditional students.

Universities across the country have improved their enrollments with a balanced strategy of recruitment that targets both incoming first year students as well as transfer students. Two-year colleges offer students many paths to higher education – returning students, recent high school graduates, and intentionally part time students can all find opportunities to begin college, and they can proceed either at full speed or on a more sporadic course. These students seek the same flexibility in the four year colleges to which they transfer.

The State of Wisconsin encourages public universities to welcome transfer students from the community colleges and the technical colleges in the system. This is the pool of students that will be most accessible to UWSP recruiters seeking to meet their enrollment targets. *To be successful in attracting these students, however, UWSP will have to examine its enrollment management strategies as well as its campus offerings.*

What are the factors affecting recruitment of transfer students to UWSP? With its programmatic strengths and student-centered environment, the University begins with many strong points to offer incoming students – first year or transfer.

In addition to identifying new student populations who could be attracted to UWSP, it is very important that the University review its programs and services as they are related to those new populations. Viewed from the perspective of transfer students and returning adult students, UWSP has competitive disadvantages that will become increasingly important. Specifically, transfer students may be adversely affected by:

- General Degree Requirements
 - Large commitment of credits
 - Lack of articulation agreements, especially with Technical Colleges
- Lack of general education courses offered in the evening or on weekends

General Degree Requirements. One of the most distinctive features of a University of Wisconsin – Stevens Point degree is its set of General Degree Requirements (GDR). The GDR represents a strong commitment on the part of the University and its faculty to an extensive core of liberal arts and sciences courses. Depending upon their choices and ability to select GDR courses that may satisfy more than one category, students may take as many as 55 credits in satisfying these requirements.

Nearly unchanged for three decades, the GDR introduce students to a breadth of knowledge and ways of knowing that range from humanities and arts through social sciences to mathematics and science. This is not unusual for general education programs. What make UWSP's GDR distinctive are the additional elements of knowledge of global cultures, environmental issues, and wellness. The learning goals for the GDR outline the ambitious expectations that UWSP has for its graduates, combining basic competencies with disciplinary content and values.

Much of the impact – educational and political – of the GDR has to be understood in its genesis. As noted, the GDR rests on faculty commitment to a strong foundation of knowledge and abilities. During a period of fiscal constraint, the GDR was codified as a way to protect departmental budgets. The Faculty Senate adopted a policy that guarantees GDR departments a percentage of the student credit hours (SCH) generated by the program. Now, as then, there is a strong conviction among the faculty that the internal distribution of resources is driven by a department’s production of SCH. Consequently, there is a very strong resistance to relaxing the SCH distribution policy, even though there is no immediate threat of fiscal austerity measures and despite assurances from the current administration that budget allocations are made in the context of the goals set in UWSP’s strategic planning.

The combination of the substantial number of credit hours in the GDR and the complexity of the multiple goals, codified through Faculty Senate action, has created an inflexible general education program. Although the Faculty Senate considered the need for changes approximately 10 years ago, it proved to be nearly impossible to make more than small adjustments. Any change in the program threatens to result in changes in the distribution of SCH, which is not permitted under the faculty senate policy and which is resisted in any case because of the fear of adverse consequences. Thus, a general education program created thirty years ago continues today largely unchanged.

With the approaching accreditation visit of the Higher Learning Commission (HLC), UWSP has confronted the need to make its learning goals for the GDR explicit and to devise an assessment system to ensure that these learning goals are met – or that there are changes in policy needed to achieve them. The Faculty Senate committee on the GDR did develop a set of ambitious learning outcomes for each goal in the GDR.

The obvious next step in preparation for the upcoming accreditation visit is to develop assessments to measure the achievement of learning outcomes. The Faculty Senate Assessment Subcommittee has been charged with that task; however it has not achieved consensus around its strategy of creating embedded assessment questions in the examinations of GDR courses. The lack of progress in finalizing these assessments illustrates the difficulty of working with the current GDR.

The structure of the GDR has proven to be an impediment to the development of meaningful assessments. The GDR has 13 goals, many of which are compounded. That is, goals for transferable skills (critical thinking, literacy, etc.) are embedded in content specific (and departmentally specific) contexts. Thus, critical thinking in history or science becomes a goal. The assessment committee has proposed that assessments of the transferable skills be embedded in GDR courses in which the transferable skill is a goal. The departments offering the courses have expressed the strong opinion that the transferable skill cannot be measured apart from the content, thus the interpretation of the results would “compare apples with oranges”. At the present time, it is unclear how the conflicts over appropriate assessments can be resolved; however, the upcoming

accreditation review will almost certainly demand at least a plan for meaningful assessment.

When assessments are in place, the expectation is that these measures will be used to drive changes in the GDR when (and if) its learning goals are not met. In many ways, this expectation is also an impediment to the development of assessments, since the prospects of change are cause for apprehension.

If assessments are to be meaningful, then, the University and its faculty have to be open to making changes to the GDR; however, the implied “social contract” in the distribution formulae for GDR credit hours operates in opposition to the need for change.

There are other indications that the GDR presents a challenge to the University’s goals of recruiting transfer students. AASCU team members attended several GDR classes to talk with students about their experience. While some students were able to articulate the goals for GDR, most students talked about strategies for maximizing the relevance of GDR courses for their majors and minimizing the number of courses required by selecting courses that satisfy more than one GDR goal. Many students expressed frustration with what they perceive to be a lack of relevance to their career goals. Particularly students in the professional programs expressed the opinion that “they have always known they wanted to be in [a specific] profession”. Why, they wonder, do they have to take all of these unrelated credits? This opinion, in itself, suggests that the goals of the GDR are not widely understood.

Another difficulty with the GDR will surface in the increasingly competitive environment of Wisconsin public higher education. In order to complete the GDR at UWSP, students must take as many as 15 credits more than at peer institutions. In addition, without strong transfer articulation programs, especially with Wisconsin’s technical colleges, the GDR represents a significant “cost” for transfer students. This is especially true for those students who wish to major in the professional programs or the sciences. Those students who did say that they have few problems with transfer also said that they intended to transfer and had sought advice at their community or technical college about preparing for transfer to UWSP.

Accreditation Visit. As the University faces its upcoming accreditation visit, several challenges lie ahead. *The accreditors will expect to see:*

- a campus conversant with its mission
- strategic planning to ensure the achievement of University goals
- enrollment management planning to meet the University’s enrollment targets and goals for fiscal security
- effective assessment systems to monitor the achievement of student learning goals and the use of assessment data to make needed changes.

In all of these areas, the GDR sits as an important set of unanswered questions. Both administrators and members of the Faculty Senate expressed the need to address the University’s current mission statement. This must be done through campus deliberation

and then review by the University of Wisconsin system. While there is interest and commitment to such a serious review on the campus, most people with whom the Team spoke were pessimistic that the University of Wisconsin system office would approve a significant change in the University's somewhat broad and indistinct statement of mission.

Vision 2015: Defining UWSP for the Future.

As the University approaches its reaccreditation by the Higher Learning Commission, UWSP has wrestled with its University Mission Statement. As noted, revision of the mission statement requires a somewhat difficult approval process by the University of Wisconsin system. Most of the faculty and staff with whom we spoke felt that the current mission statement as printed in the catalog is not well focused and is not reflective of either the distinctive strengths of the University or its future direction.

Short of a formal revision of the mission statement, Chancellor Bunnell has led the campus in fashioning a vision statement. Released to the campus as Vision 2015, this statement tries to capture distinctive goals for development in the next decade, including preparing students for a global society, driving economic development in the region, and achieving the University's enrollment and programmatic goals. Some of the elements in Vision 2015 captured themes that the Team heard iterated in many ways – the environmental commitment of the faculty and students, the need to prepare for globalization as citizens and workers, and sincere dedication to teaching and learning.

Vision 2015: "UWSP: Connecting to the Future" highlights building on traditions of excellence and service to Central Wisconsin. It suggests that UWSP will CONNECT TO THE FUTURE by:

- Providing challenging learning and leadership experiences that prepare students to be GLOBAL CITIZENS
- Projecting our history and values in the LIFE AND LOOK OF THE CAMPUS
 - Experience of the liberal arts and sciences
 - Responsibility for personal and community wellness
 - Stewardship of natural resources
 - The power of communication and the arts
- Partnering with others for a VIBRANT ECONOMY.

How the Vision 2015 will lead to significant and coordinated development at the University is an important issue for the University. Change is being driven by the needs of the area and the vision of the University of Wisconsin system. Vision 2015 can provide a set of priorities to help guide that change. Achieving focused change will require that the University address other issues, such as enrollment management, general education, and the ability of the University to meet the needs of non-traditional students.

Administrative Structures – Achieving Focus and Coordination. In many areas of importance to the growth and development of the University, planning and

implementation is undertaken by parallel administrative structures. Enrollment management, student advising, and general education (GDR) are all marked by the relatively independent paths of parallel committees and administrative offices.

- **Enrollment Management.** The critically important work of identifying new student populations and attracting them to the University is currently done by two committees. One committee outlines the larger strategic issues, while the implementation of strategy is undertaken by another. In a world of stable enrollments, routine recruitment activities can be effectively managed in this way. In a world of competition and the need to address new audiences, these parallel activities are less effective in using the talents of available personnel.
- **Academic Advising and Student Development.** One of the great strengths of UWSP is its undoubted culture of attention to student success and development. Perhaps because of the pervasive agreement within the University on the primary issues of teaching and learning, multiple points of advisement have grown up around natural constituencies: general advisement for lower division students, peer advisors, and major advisors. The impact of these parallel structures is that students may not receive advising that is consistent or directed to the specific needs that they have. For example, students told us that they would give faculty advisors high marks for being accessible and helpful; however, in the complex area of GDR requirements, not all faculty advisors were as well informed as they might be about requirements outside the major program. Similarly, students report that peer advisors are their preferred source of information on the “golden bullets” – GDR courses that can satisfy one, two or even more areas with a single course. While this is pragmatic advice, the faculty may wish to consider whether this results in behavior that is consistent with their expected outcomes for the GDR. *While the points of access for advising may remain as they are, a more intentional coordination of the messages would serve the University well.*
- **General Education.** In the very important area of general education, the GDR itself is governed and implemented by different committees, and the implementation is yet more diffuse. The structure and content of the GDR is derived through faculty governance structures in which departments put forth courses to meet various points in the GDR. The GDR subcommittee of the Faculty Senate evaluates the course in light of the goals of the particular section of the GDR and then approves it for GDR credit or not.

The assessment of GDR courses, in which assessment data is supposed to be developed and used in a continuing review of GDR courses, is overseen by the Assessment Subcommittee of the Faculty Senate. Members of both the GDR and the Assessment Subcommittees told members of the Team that they have very little communication around the coordination of these activities.

As noted earlier, the distribution of the percentage of the SCH generated by the GDR was created by the Faculty Senate, locking in the distribution of responsibility for course delivery. The regulation sits outside the GDR and the Assessment Subcommittees.

While faculty often expressed the belief that funding for faculty lines and departmental resources is driven by SCH, administrators indicated this is only partially true. Resources that are distributed on criteria other than SCH – for the creation of new programs, for example – may have implications for general education without communication with the Faculty Senate about the ways that they may have an impact on the GDR. For instance, changes in academic advisement for lower division students may be designed to clarify the selection of courses in GDR for students. Activities to build new approaches to teaching and learning, generated by faculty and supported by the administration, may significantly affect how learning occurs within part or all of the GDR.

None of these activities are coordinated because of the decentralized nature of the GDR. Making the decentralized fissures more difficult to bridge is the lack of trust between faculty and administrators and even among faculty. Members of the Team commented specifically on the need for greater levels of communication and engagement between faculty and administrators around the issues of undergraduate education and the GDR. The irony is that the culture of the UWSP campus is one of collegiality and a high degree of consensus around the values of student success, the importance of teaching, and the core values of liberal arts, environmental integrity, and intellectual rigor. It appears to be the lingering effect of financial exigency and the fear of renewed funding cuts that stands in the way of real collaboration between administration and faculty.

Next Steps

The University of Wisconsin – Stevens Point sits in an enviable position. Its profile is one of a highly successful university. Its enrollments are stable, its students are well qualified, and the University has demonstrated its ability to retain and to graduate the students it attracts. The National Survey of Student Engagement reflects student satisfaction with the educational program and the culture of the institution. The administration and the faculty have been able to aim higher by aspiring to raise the intellectual challenge of the institution.

As the discussions with campus constituencies – faculty, staff, administrators, and students – indicated to the team, the University is aware of the challenges that lie ahead. For the most part, these audiences are also ready to meet the issues of recruitment, advising, assessment, and review of the GDR. The AASCU Team strongly suggests that attention to all of these areas is important to the long-term competitive position of UWSP.

Review of Administrative Structure. Addressing the issues of enrollment management, review of the GDR, and preparation for the Higher Learning Commission accreditation review will require focused review and very intentional implementation of policies that result. The ability of the University to continue as a highly successful institution marked by student success, program integrity, and fiscal viability will depend on its ability to draw on its history of success in the service of meeting the future.

To accomplish these demanding tasks will require that the various constituencies in the University can come together and engage meaningfully around these issues. Organizational silos must be bridged and University resources such as expertise and information have to be shared. This means **an important first step is to review the administrative structure to avoid duplication and parallel structures.** The University should expect the result to be better use of information resources, faculty and staff time, and greater degrees of engagement by all important constituencies on central issues.

Enrollment Management. At the current time, the University's recruitment efforts are implemented through a parallel administrative structure – one committee focusing on shorter term concerns while the other takes a longer range point of view. There is no evidence yet visible to the campus community of a strong commitment to a comprehensive enrollment strategy that involves the whole campus in a data-driven process of strategic recruitment.

Strategic enrollment management is a comprehensive approach to shaping the enrollment profile of an institution that seeks to anticipate and optimize key characteristics of the student body, such as size, quality, mix, and diversity and to understand the relationships among these characteristics. The entire campus needs to be involved in identifying the goals – how large should the University be? Should the University recruit a larger percentage of transfer students?

Comprehensive enrollment management is also critically important in aligning academic and administrative policies with the recruitment goals of the University. If, for example, the University determines that its enrollment goals can be achieved only if transfer students and more non-traditional students can be attracted to UWSP, then offices scheduling courses need to anticipate more evening sections of GDR courses. Residential programs may require adjustment for transfer or returning students who choose to live in University residence halls. A review of administrative structures to eliminate redundancy and to clarify the responsibility for formulating and implementing policy should be undertaken. Furthermore, the enrollment policies developed by the campus should be based on a clear sense of mission and reliable data.

Advising and Student Success. The Summer 2005 Map of Student Success Activities displays an impressive attention to strategies for ensuring and improving student success. This is particularly true of the campus-wide reflection that is currently occurring regarding each unit's contribution to achieving the five National Survey of Student Engagement benchmarks. The current plan to have faculty reflect on their teaching in relation to these benchmarks is an excellent idea.

The student-centered campus focus is also apparent in the area of advising. Many students reported that faculty were available to talk about major advising and that the Advising Center paid close attention to the progress students make toward graduation. Other students, however, lamented that their faculty advisors were often “clueless” about the intricacies of the GDR. Several students indicated that they relied primarily on the peer advisors assigned to them for information about the GDR, assistance with the

registration process, and information about career directions within their chosen fields. What students often valued about this information was its strategic nature – finding GDR courses that would satisfy two, three, or even four categories with a single course.

Faculty and staff noted the importance of academic advising as the messenger for the value-added nature of the General Degree Requirements, as the interpreter of what appears on the surface to be a complex matrix of possibilities (some referred to the GDRs as a “menu of opportunities”), and as the provider of guidance in selection of appropriate GDRs. It was noted that the richness of a student’s educational plan was often dependent upon the quality of academic advising they received. At the same time, some faculty members admitted that they encouraged students to take GDR courses that were more closely aligned with their majors rather than with the intent that students be broadly educated.

Academic Advising at UWSP is decentralized and utilizes a split model of organization where students who are undecided/exploratory (or otherwise determined to be a special population – at-risk, transitioning, etc.) are advised through a central advising center. Those students who have declared a major are advised through their respective academic departments. UWSP utilizes a range of delivery systems to support its academic advising program – peer advisors, professional advisors, and faculty advisors. In addition, not unusual for this organizational model, the central Advising Center has emerged as a campus resource for academic information and support for advising across the University.

Strengthening academic advising at UWSP has already begun. The move by the Faculty Senate to recommend changes to the University’s promotion and tenure guidelines to treat academic advising as teaching rather than service is an important statement that – if implemented consistently across the campus – will serve as an important recognition that academic advising is an important instructional process in the student experience. There are additional ways in which the academic advising program at UWSP could be strengthened and made more cohesive.

- Clearly articulating the responsibility for campus-wide coordination of academic advising. From our discussions, there emerged an understanding that academic advising is not well-coordinated at UWSP. There does not seem to be a mechanism through which those involved in academic advising communicate with each other in order to promote consistency across the university. How academic advising is conceived and delivered is localized within each school/college and/or department. This contributes to the unevenness of advising at UWSP. Our recommendation is that the responsibility for coordinating academic advising be articulated with the portfolio of an administrative office within academic affairs. This office (and the identified individual) would serve as the champion for academic advising on campus and work collaboratively with all those involved in academic advising. Specific steps to be taken include:
 - Institutionalising the Council of Advisors to be intentionally structured and charged with:

- Articulating a university-wide philosophy and concept of academic advising that is consistent with the National Academic Advising Association’s Concept of Academic Advising, Core Values Statement
 - Facilitating the development of assessment plans for academic advising within each of the delivery sites for academic advising. These plans need to be outcomes-based and identify outcomes for both student learning and for the delivery of academic advising (i.e., advisor outcomes). Identifying advisor outcomes (i.e., what advisors need to know, do, and value in order to support the outcomes for student learning) will assist in the design of professional development opportunities for those involved with academic advising
 - Identifying and/or providing resources and programs to support faculty and professional advisor training / development initiatives. Internal professional development opportunities should utilize the internal resources available, such as those in the Academic Advising Center and other “pockets” of advising excellence noted above
 - Examining the peer advising programs on campus. The use of peers in academic advising is an excellent way to supplement the academic advising program. Peer advising should not be used to supplant professional and faculty advisors, but to enrich and support their work. There does not seem to be an understanding of how peers are utilized in various departments / schools / colleges. Peers can be used in a variety of ways and it is important to understand how they are utilized across campus and to ensure that peer advisors, as para-professionals and the representatives of UWSP, are receiving the training and support that they will need to perform their roles well
 - Strengthening the reward and recognition of good academic advising. Following up on the Faculty Senate’s recommendation to treat advising as teaching in the promotion and tenure process is an important initiative as is designing other ways to reward academic advising on campus (for professional, faculty, and peer advisors).
- The Council of Advisors has the potential to serve as a university-wide academic advising council. Currently, the Advising Center reports to Student Affairs and departmental / school / college advising rests with Academic Affairs. While the Council can be strengthened to bring greater coherence to the guidance that students receive, the University may wish to consider placing Academic Advisement under Academic Affairs, leaving Career Services and counseling under Student Affairs.

Reviewing the General Degree Requirements. The GDR has been discussed extensively in this report, indicating the centrality of its location in the academic landscape of UWSP.

It is, therefore, critically important that UWSP review the General Degree Requirements. While the University of Wisconsin system may make it difficult to substantially revise the UWSP mission statement, beginning with a more focused campus understanding of its mission would be an excellent starting point for refining the GDR.

At the present time, some faculty members, students, and advisors seem uncertain about the purpose and value of the GDRs. In addition, many who talked with the AASCU Team about the GDRs spoke of disparate content areas rather than transferable skills. It could be that the “thirteen statements” comprising the current GDR categories are too numerous and diffuse to form a coherent grouping in the minds of either faculty or students. *Narrowing these down to a small number of goals clearly related to a revised University Mission Statement could provide the GDR program with a stronger sense of identity and purpose.* Moreover, focusing the GDRs more on student abilities or core competencies (such as communication skills, critical thinking, global awareness, or environmental literacy) could aid in the understanding of what is inherently *general* about a GDR course – the knowledge, skills, and values that are embedded in the course.

This is not to slight the importance of disciplinary content, which will give a different substance and inflection to the abilities students learn, depending on the particular class. *However, balancing content with an attention to these abilities can help students to understand that they can gain transferable skills along with breadth of knowledge from GDR classes, and it can help major faculty to appreciate how GDR courses complement – rather than compete with – major classes, enabling students to excel in their major and future careers.* Derek Bok’s *Our Underachieving Colleges* (Princeton, 2006) argues for the importance of a renewed focus on core student abilities and might be worth consulting. Ideally, all USP faculty would be able to unite in agreement with this excellent statement made in the University’s Assessment Plan: “general education should not be equated solely with the General Degree Requirements. General education is a result of the entire learning process at UWSP, in both GDR courses and the major fields. The entire learning experience is here to provide students with a liberal education as well as specific career training.”

A more focused set of GDRs would enable easier assessment of student learning in GDR classes. Rather than struggling to assess subject-matter knowledge across disparate content areas, the campus could allow such content-specific assessment to be handled by the individual departments and concentrate its GDR assessment on ascertaining student abilities that are common throughout the different disciplines. The campus might find *Assessing General Education Programs* by Mary J. Allen (Anker, 2006) to be a useful resource.

A more focused organizational structure for GDR assessment could foster greater dialogue and a more common sense of purpose between General Education and the major departments. One option would be to form a GDR Assessment Committee that would assess core student abilities in collaboration with the individual departments’ assessment efforts during their regular program review cycle. An advantage to this system would be closer cooperation between General Education and the major departments, who could

engage in a dialogue regarding students' attainment of the GDR competencies at the same time as they are discussing students' achievement of the learning outcomes in the major. The link between the GDR competencies and the learning outcomes in the major could become clearer, and the GDR Assessment Committee would have the opportunity of working with the major faculty during the time when they are most open to self reflection and improvement: their program review. Departmental and GDR assessment would thus be aligned; departmental faculty would have greater investment in the GDR learning outcomes; and ideas for improvement could be implemented right away in the GDR and major classes offered by the department, thus closing the assessment loop.

As an alternative to the option discussed above, UWSP's current plan to have embedded questions in GDR classes reviewed by the Assessment Subcommittee seems viable under certain conditions:

1. That assessment be focused on a limited number of GDR competencies
2. That the faculty teaching GDR courses believe in the importance of the particular competencies being assessed, so that dialogue between the Assessment Subcommittee and the teaching faculty around the assessment results will be productive
3. that there be a clear and continual means for closing the loop: how and when will assessment results lead to changes in the classroom to improve student learning in these GDR competencies?

Once assessment of student learning has identified the particular GDR competencies in which students most need improvement, the Center for Academic Excellence (CAE) could become one of the most important means for helping faculty to make changes in the classroom that would effect this improvement. The CAE is already off to a fine start, conducting workshops on infusing diversity into the curriculum, incorporating service learning in courses, and using technology in the classroom. If the university were to forge a formal link between GDR assessment results and CAE workshops, then faculty would have a place to go in order to hear inspiring speakers, join discussion sessions, and locate print and web resources on improving student learning in specific GDR competencies. Workshops could be offered whenever assessment results indicate a need for one in any given GDR competency area. Attendance at these workshops could become an effective and invigorating way for faculty to be exposed to the latest research on teaching and learning.

Finally, achieving a more focused and unified set of GDRs could be immeasurably helped by the creation of a Director of General Education at UWSP. As the campus moves toward greater focus in GDR and alignment with a refined University Mission Statement, the Director of GE could serve as a coordinator of the various departmental offerings and the need for assessment. The Director would ideally serve as a link among the various committees evaluating courses for inclusion in the GDR as well as with advisors, academic support personnel, and departments as they make decisions about scheduling and course offerings.

Ideally, the various units across campus would be able to speak with a more unified voice about the meaning and value of the GDR program. Focusing the GDRs around a more limited set of core competencies could help to achieve this unity of identity and purpose just as the GE Director could serve as a means to consensus and a conveyor of a common set of messages about the GDR. UWSP's New Student Orientation already does a fine job explaining the value of the GDR to incoming students and their parents. It is important that this message be carried through by the advisors – profession, faculty, and peer – who guide students through the curriculum.

The AASCU Team strongly recommends that the faculty and the administration develop the necessary trust and understanding of the alternatives in order to move forward in an intentional review and reform of the GDR. Students showed little understanding of the intent of the GDR to encourage breadth and depth of understanding of cultures, ways of knowing, or of issues such as the environment. Instead, they take a much more pragmatic and strategic view, seeking GDR courses that satisfy more than one requirement or that are related to their major fields of interest.

Past efforts to reform the GDR have been stalled the inability of the campus to agree on the core goals of GDR and – most important – by the real importance of student credit hours as the driving force in budget allocations. The Team offered a number of strategies designed to look at GDR in a new way. The most important recommendation, however, is that faculty members and the administration must come together in a joint endeavor to make general education both a hallmark of the University of Wisconsin – Stevens Point degree *and* an attraction for a broader and more diverse student body.

Conclusions

The University of Wisconsin – Stevens Point must confront the need for change that will be driven by policies and demographic changes that lie outside the University. The University's capacity to meet these external challenges, however, is considerably enhanced by its programmatic and cultural strengths, as the report has iterated in many areas. Achieving change, however, will require one fundamental change in the culture – the development of trust and collaboration between the administration and the faculty around the shared values of teaching, learning, and student success.

Appendix I:
AASCU Team Meetings
November 2 – 3, 2006

Chancellor Bunnell

Provost Helm

Office of Academic Affairs Groups

Deans of the Colleges

Institutional Research Office

Center for Academic Excellence and Service Learning Directors

Student Academic Advising Center Advisors

Academic Advisors for the School of Education and the College
of Natural Resources

Academic Advisors in the Division of Business and Economics

Enrollment Management Committee

Tutoring Learning Center

Academic Affairs Office

New Student Seminar

GDR Groups

GDR Subcommittee

Assessment Subcommittee

Student Affairs Division Groups

Student Success

Student Affairs Directors

New Student Orientation

Accreditation Steering Committee

Meetings with Faculty Senate and Faculty Groups

Executive Committee of the Faculty Senate

GDR Subcommittee

Assessment Subcommittee

Brown bag lunch with faculty

Professor Greg Summers

Informal meeting with faculty

Discussions with Students

Members of the Executive Committee of the Student Government Assn.

Sociology 101 Students

IA 150 Students

Returning students

English Literature I Students

Astronomy 100 Students

Appendix II
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