

BACCALAUREATE REVIEW TASK FORCE

DISCOVERING WHAT NIU GRADUATES
SHOULD KNOW, VALUE, AND
BE ABLE TO DO



NIU

NORTHERN
ILLINOIS
UNIVERSITY

UNIVERSITY REPORT

September 2009

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Abstract

Northern Illinois University's "Great Journeys Strategic Plan" identified general education reform as a major priority. The first phase of this reform requires a review and discussion of the university's baccalaureate degree goals. That is to say, what knowledge, values, and skills should NIU graduates develop? What ideals should be promoted?

During the Spring 2009 semester, the NIU Baccalaureate Review Task Force gathered information on these questions through two primary strategies—focus groups and an online survey. By the end of the semester, 929 people had responded to the online survey. In addition, 45 focus groups were held with different constituency groups of students, faculty, staff, administrators, commissions, centers, and employers.

Information gathered through the focus groups and online survey showed remarkable similarity. People identified and emphasized the same goals despite different backgrounds. Three core themes emerged from the data analysis. Specifically, participants thought the baccalaureate curriculum should create graduates who have mastered critical thinking, communication skills, and an understanding of context (the "Three Cs"). These themes will be presented to the university community during the Fall 2009 semester.

Introduction

We live in rapidly changing times. For example, the world's population is growing rapidly. Technology evolves faster than many can maintain currency. Natural resources are being depleted and/or polluted at ever increasing rates. The economy is in the midst of serious recession. In addition, increased globalization requires greater understanding of diverse people and cultures.

In the United States, the college student population is becoming ever more diverse. According to the Chronicle of Higher Education (August 28, 2009), Caucasian students account for 62% of all college students with Black and Hispanic students accounting for another 28%. Illinois mirrors this distribution. At Illinois' public 4-year institutions, slightly over 27% of students are minorities. At NIU, diversity is further enhanced by transfer students, those who work full or part time, and those who commute to campus. The diversity of the student body presents a challenge to higher education.

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In addition to the challenges of a diverse student body, there is a broad, general perception among business leaders that colleges are not adequately preparing graduates for success in the 21st century. The American Association of Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) commissioned Hart Research Associates (2007) to survey employers regarding students' preparation for work. Their findings indicate that employers are most interested in employees with strong general education skills and knowledge. The "right major" was seen as less important than the right skills for a specific job. Specific educational goals suggested in this report include:

1. The ability to work well in teams—especially with people different from yourself
2. An understanding of science and technology and how these subjects are used in real-world settings
3. The ability to write and speak well
4. The ability to think clearly about complex problems
5. The ability to analyze a problem to develop workable solutions
6. An understanding of the global context in which work is now done
7. The ability to be creative and innovative in solving problems
8. The ability to apply knowledge and skills in new settings
9. The ability to understand numbers and statistics
10. A strong sense of ethics and integrity

In addition to the concerns voiced by employers, there is significant evidence that earning a college degree provides multiple benefits for both individuals and society. It is well known, for example, that there is a strong positive correlation between educational attainment and yearly earnings across all racial and ethnic groups. Baum and Ma (2007) noted that college graduates are more likely to enjoy employer-provided health insurance. There are also multiple nonmonetary benefits derived from a college education. For example, research consistently shows that college graduates have better health. The Institute for Higher Education Policy (1998) reported that college graduates have increased personal and professional mobility, improved quality of life for their offspring, and make better consumer decisions. Baum and Ma identified a number of societal benefits that result from higher education. These benefits include increased tax revenues, higher levels of civic participation, and greater openness to others' opinions.

Universities have a societal responsibility to prepare graduates who have the knowledge, values, and skills to be successful. A university's baccalaureate goals should be consistent with the needs

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of students to meet current societal needs and to provide leadership for the future. Accepting this responsibility requires that we (students, faculty, staff, administrators) develop a shared understanding of “what should be learned.” This raises the question of what student-learning goals should drive the baccalaureate curriculum and what kind of education is best for our students.

A university’s baccalaureate goals are exemplified, in part, by its general education program. Baccalaureate goals are also demonstrated through the major as well as co-curricular activities (see Figure 1).

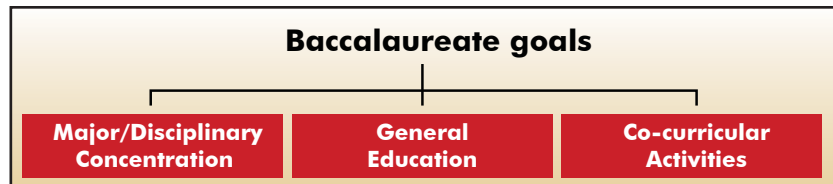


Figure 1. Support for baccalaureate goals

A strong general education program can provide students with the skills, competencies, and knowledge bases needed in today’s society; promote and instill core values held by the university community; provide a foundation for stronger major programs; improve student retention and academic success; and enhance institutional identity (Gaston & Graff, 2009). Goals that are widely known and valued can also encourage substantive conversations with students, parents, employers, policy makers, and the public. A well-constructed and understood general education program makes the university more attractive to prospective students and has a strengthening effect on alumni loyalty—and thus support. In addition, well-educated graduates are more employable and able to function across a variety of work settings. Perhaps most importantly, general education should help students become better people and lead more fulfilling lives.

Despite the clear value of a strong general education program, many universities fall short. The AAC&U recently completed a survey of 433 Chief Academic Officers (April 2009). These educational leaders acknowledged that general education has increased as a priority. Unfortunately, most students do not understand intended general education learning outcomes. In addition, less than half of the respondents felt that their general education programs were well integrated with students’ major requirements.

The baccalaureate curriculum and general education are particularly relevant issues for NIU. Campus-wide discussions regarding the baccalaureate degree took place during 1982-1983. A report issued in 1983 from the Baccalaureate Review Committee included a statement of philosophy, common expectations for the baccalaureate degree, a brief summary of current practices at NIU, and recommendations. In 1988 the University Council established the Undergraduate Coordinating Council (UCC). This body subsequently authorized six committees to report to the UCC, one of which was the General Education Committee (GEC). In the ensuing 20 years, the GEC established criteria for course inclusion in the program and also initiated assessment of student learning goals. Despite these efforts, campus-wide understanding and endorsement appear lacking. In addition, there is no explicit link between general education and broader baccalaureate goals. Given the lack of attention paid to baccalaureate curriculum planning, general education reform has not been a consistent theme at NIU. There is general agreement among faculty members and students that the general education program at NIU can be improved.

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In 2007-2008, NIU's "Great Journeys Strategic Plan" identified general education reform as a top priority. A strong general education program directly addresses two strategic planning imperatives.

- Preserve, strengthen and extend NIU's teaching and learning environment
- Make NIU an institution of first choice for students, faculty, and staff

The Presidential Task Force on Curricular Innovation also called for a significantly enhanced general education program in its April 2008 report. Similarly, President Peters requested "general education reform" in his 2008 State of the University address.

In response to these calls, a seven-person steering committee from NIU participated in the 2008 AAC&U General Education Institute. This is a week-long institute designed to help colleges and university teams plan for general education improvement.

Two key strategies emerged from the steering committee's participation:

First, prior to reforming general education, NIU's baccalaureate goals must be known, and owned, by the university community.

Second, developing meaningful baccalaureate goals requires that multiple stakeholders (e.g., students, faculty, staff, administrators, employers) be included as collaborators.

With these strategies in mind, a plan was developed to create shared understanding and support for NIU's baccalaureate goals. These goals would then be used to guide general education reform. The goals would also be supported and reinforced in students' majors. That is to say, baccalaureate goals operate on at least two levels: broad knowledge through the general education program and more specific, disciplinary-based knowledge through the major. A meaningful baccalaureate curriculum is aligned with the learning needs of the students and should support the specific needs, issues, and strengths of NIU as a public university. Ideally, the goals should foster a sense of community and shared purpose.

It should be emphasized that faculty, staff, administrators, and students are members of the academic community. Reviewing baccalaureate goals and developing a meaningful curriculum through which to achieve those goals offers a form of cohesion and unity to NIU. We recognize the privilege of working in this environment and its inherent obligation to better society. This process is a way to honor the institution of higher education. Our current effort is designed to improve students' educational outcomes by developing goals to guide planning and decision making. This review is an opportunity to make our efforts in teaching students more meaningful.

The development and implementation of the task force's plan, findings, and recommendations occupy the remainder of this report.

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Baccalaureate Review Task Force Composition

In September 2008, Vice Provost Earl Seaver issued a campus-wide e-mail and paper memorandum that called for task force volunteers to “conduct campus-wide discussions of the baccalaureate goals, obtain feedback, revise draft goals, and submit the goals for campus approval through the established governance structure.” Anyone who volunteered was included on the task force. In addition, several people were nominated and subsequently agreed to serve.

The task force includes 15 steering committee members and 29 task force members. Faculty, staff, and administrators from all undergraduate colleges are represented. Professor Greg Long and Vice Provost Earl “Gip” Seaver are the co-chairs (see Figure 2).

Baccalaureate student representation was absent on the task force during the initial planning and development. Instead, their input was obtained through participation in focus groups and responses to the online survey. In July 2009, two student members joined the steering committee (Robert Sorsby and Daniel Matousek). To further increase student involvement, in August 2009 letters were sent to each college dean requesting nominations for student membership on the task force.

College of Business	College of Health & Human Sciences	Administrators & Support Staff
Elisa Fredericks* Rebecca Shortridge	M.J. Blaschak Greg Long* (Co-Chair) Mary Pritchard Josephine Umoren	F Michelle Bringas* James Brunson Jes Cisneros* Paul Crawford Carolinda Douglass* Samantha M. Fisher Barbara Fouts* Wendell Johnson Nancy Kasinski Murali Krishnamurthi* Margie Myles Deb Pierce Pamela Rosenberg Earl "Gip" Seaver* (Co-Chair) Donna Smith
College of Education	College of Liberal Arts & Sciences	
Alan Clemens Jeffrey Hecht Lucy Townsend* Marc VanOverbeke	David Ballantine Anne Birberick Dave Changnon* David Gorman Janice Hamlet Jim Schmidt Linda Sons Paul Stoddard*	
College of Engineering & Engineering Technology	College of Visual & Performing Arts	Students
Brianno Coller Omar Ghrayeb* Earl Hansen Donald Zinger	Sinclair Bell Glenda Cosenza Kerry Freedman Ed Klonoski Jeff Kowalski*	Robert Sorsby* Daniel Matousek*
		* = Steering committee member

Figure 2. Task force membership

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Developing a plan

AAC&U is a strong proponent for liberal education as a framework for the baccalaureate degree. The organization recently reported that 89% of its membership was in some process of general education review, discussion, and/or implementation of change (April 2009). Consequently, there are many roadmaps available for general education reform. Many other colleges and universities have already pursued this endeavor. Notable examples include Portland State University, University of Nebraska, and Temple University. The committee attempted to learn from others' mistakes and model their successes.

NIU's specific plan arose as a result of the steering committee's participation at the AAC&U General Education Institute. As a result of this participation, it became clear that the university's first priority should be to review the goals and outcomes for the baccalaureate degree prior to addressing the general education program. In addition, it was stressed that this task requires inclusiveness. All relevant constituencies (e.g., students, faculty, staff, administrators, employers) should be seen as collaborators. Plans developed by groups with limited input, no matter how well intentioned, frequently fail.

Based on these considerations, the steering committee decided to conduct focus groups and post an online survey to gather input regarding baccalaureate goals. Data from the survey and focus groups would then be used to identify the baccalaureate learning goals people identified as most important.

The following section describes how the survey was constructed and focus groups organized.

Online survey—construction

The steering committee met several times during the summer and early fall of 2008. One of the committee's early tasks was to identify broad, heuristic aims. These aims were then used to structure the survey and organize specific questions. Following significant discussion and review, the following aims were selected:

- Promote a literate society
- Contribute to a democratic society
- Value the interdependence between people and nature
- Advocate for diversity both locally and globally
- Continue learning about the world and themselves
- Create, transfer, and preserve knowledge

Specific student-learning goals were organized under each aim. The goals were taken from the current undergraduate catalog, 1983 Baccalaureate Review Committee Report, AAC&U's Liberal Education and America's Promise, and related sources.

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The survey (see Appendix A) included 23 Likert-type questions structured to identify knowledge, values, and skills expected of baccalaureate graduates. Participants were asked to rate questions using a four-point scale (1 = not important, 2 = helpful, 3 = important, 4 = essential). Figure 3 provides a graphic representation of the survey’s structure. In addition to the rating questions, the survey asked participants to rank order the aims and provide narrative responses to the following three questions:

- What do we want NIU students to know?
- What do we want them to be able to do?
- What kind of individuals do we want to them become?

Broad Educational Aims	Examples from the Survey
Promote a literate society	Exhibit information and quantitative literacy Access and critically use various information sources
Contribute to a democratic society	Demonstrate civic knowledge and engagement Follow ethical reasoning and action
Value the interdependence between people and nature	Understand the scientific method Demonstrate global awareness and environmental sensitivity
Advocate for diversity both locally and globally	Demonstrate multicultural sensitivity Understand how societies and cultures develop
Continue learning about the world and themselves	Engage “big questions” Use inquiry, critical, and creative thinking skills
Create, transfer and preserve knowledge	Understand the intellectual processes, perspectives, and methodologies implicit in one’s major. Appreciate creative forms of production

Figure 3. Online survey structure

Focus groups—Organization and implementation

The purpose of the focus groups was to gain participants’ input regarding potential baccalaureate learning goals. The task force sought input from multiple groups including students, faculty, staff, administrators, employers, members of presidential commissions, and diversity centers’ staff.

Training: To standardize the focus group interviews, the steering committee developed a moderator’s guide. The guide included a description of the focus group’s purpose, structure, needed supplies, and instructions. A reporting template was also included. Appendix B includes a copy of the moderator’s guide. In addition, each task force member was required to participate in a one-hour training session. Three sessions were held in February 2008. Every task force member participated and then shared their feedback on the process. This feedback was subsequently used to make several changes to the final moderator’s guide.

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Soliciting participation: At the start of the 2009 spring semester, each of the following groups received a request to participate in a focus group:

- **Faculty:** college councils, college curriculum committees, Honors Council, Faculty Senate
- **Administrators:** Council of Deans, advising deans, curricular deans, senior cabinet members, college senates, vice provost directors
- **Staff:** Operating Staff Council, Supportive Professional Staff Council, International Studies, admissions counselors, Library Operating Staff Council
- **Diversity centers:** Latino Resource Center, LGBT Resource Center, Asian American Center, Center for Black Studies, Women's Resource Center
- **Presidential commissions:** Status of Minorities, Status of Women, Persons with Disabilities, Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity

In addition to direct solicitations from the task force, three additional strategies were used to organize focus groups. First, the Office of Career Services was instrumental in organizing focus groups with employers. They sent letters, e-mails, and called employers who recruit NIU graduates. Their effort resulted in three focus groups, one of which was held at the DeKalb campus and the remaining two at the Naperville campus.

Second, input from **students** was obtained through focus groups led by other students. The task force felt that students would be more likely to freely share their thoughts if talking with another student instead of task force members. Professor Elisa Fredericks, a steering committee member and faculty member in the College of Business, taught students in her marketing class how to conduct focus groups. They were then required to organize, conduct, and write a summary of a focus group they conducted. This effort resulted in 16 student-led groups. Figure 4 shows the distribution of focus groups across the various constituency groups. Appendix C provides a list of all groups led by the task force.

A third strategy to obtain input was the use of **open forums**. During the 2009 spring semester, three open forums were held.

In total, task force members held 29 focus groups in addition to the 16 student-led groups and three open forums.

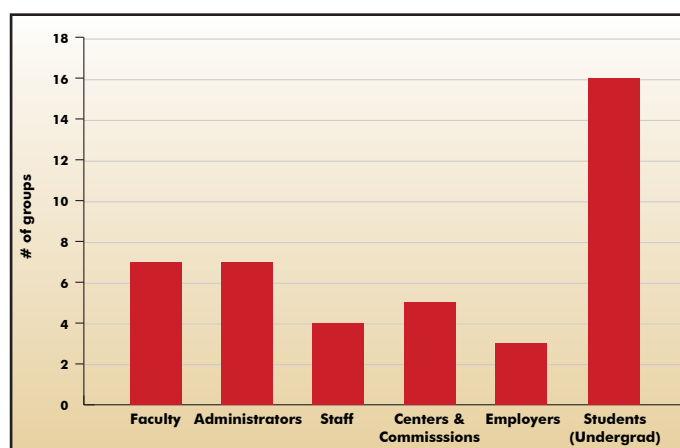


Figure 4. Focus groups by constituency group

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How were focus groups conducted?

A team of two or three task force members led each focus group. One member facilitated the discussion while another recorded ideas on a flip chart. If a third task force member was present, he or she kept a separate sheet of notes for comparison purposes. The focus group interviews were not videotaped or recorded in order to encourage open discussion.

At the beginning of each group, the task force leaders explained the purpose of the meeting and asked participants to complete an informed consent statement and demographic information form. Participants were also given a form to request follow-up information if they so desired.

To begin each group, participants were told the following:

This focus group should take about 45-60 minutes to complete. We will review a list of aims and then, one by one, determine what goals will help us achieve each aim. Toward the end of the focus group we would also like you to consider if there are other aims and goals that Northern Illinois University should address. The Baccalaureate Review Steering Committee developed these aims as a starting point for our discussion. There are many aims, these are just a few to elicit your feedback.

We would like you to help us develop **goals** that will enhance the baccalaureate experience of students at NIU. For instance, what should our students be able to do when they leave NIU? What qualities and characteristics should our students have as graduates of NIU? Each one of you may have a different perspective and that's great. We want different ideas and opinions. We value your frank and honest comments, suggestions, and recommendations.

The aims used to structure the focus groups were the same as used in the online survey. The task force felt it was important to provide the aims as a framework for discussion. Some of the potential participants would have little, if any, background in curriculum development (e.g., students, employers). During focus group training sessions for task force members, it became apparent that faculty members felt constrained by the aims. As such, the aims were not used to structure focus groups with faculty. Instead, faculty participants were encouraged to consider and suggest any aims, goals, and/or objectives they felt were important.

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Who participated in the survey and focus groups?

Online survey: The survey was available from early February 2009 to May 1, 2009. During this three-month period, 929 people responded. Over half also provided one or more written responses. Participants identified themselves among the following groups: student, faculty member, staff member, employer, alumni, parent, administrator or community college representative. Students represented the largest respondent group. Figures 5-8 depict demographic characteristics of the sample.

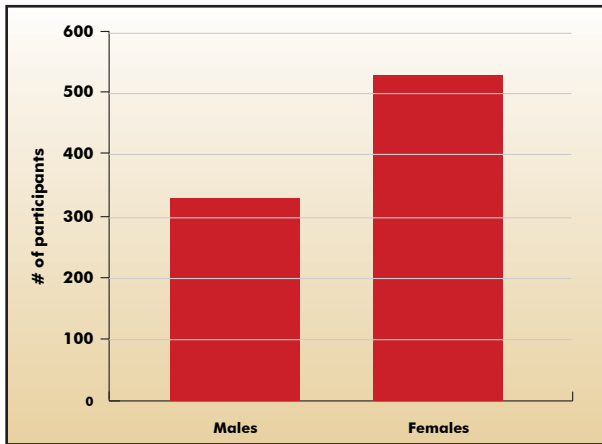


Figure 5. Online survey participation by gender

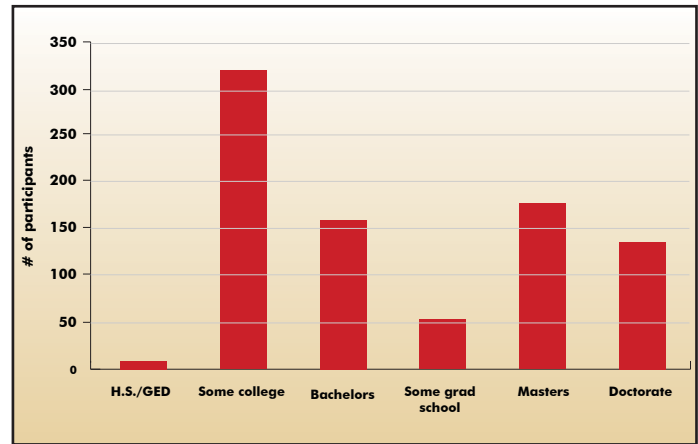


Figure 6. Online survey participation by education

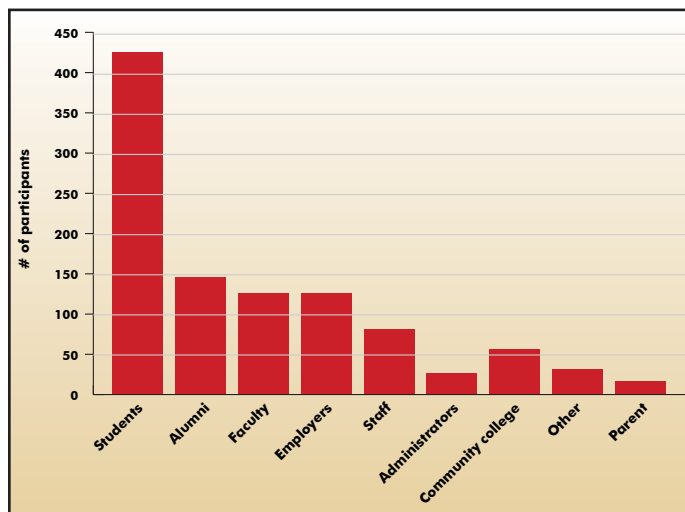


Figure 7. Online survey participation by affiliation to NIU

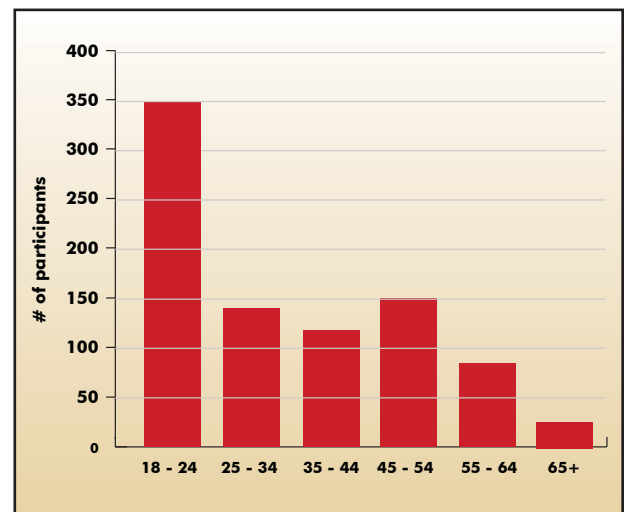


Figure 8. Online survey participation by age

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Focus groups: Two hundred fifteen people participated in focus groups led by the task force. Characteristics of the participants in task force-led groups are presented in Table 1. Students led 16 focus groups that included 149 participants. Student groups ranged from 3-13 participants with an average size of 8-9. Student characteristics are presented in Table 2. Unfortunately, data concerning students' age and educational standing were not collected.

Gender	Race/Ethnicity	Age	Education	Affiliation
Male = 85	Caucasian = 164	18-24 = 15	H.S./GED = 3	Student = 22
Female = 130	Hispanic = 10	25-34 = 20	Some coll. = 25	Faculty = 90
	African Amer. = 25	35-44 = 41	Bachelors = 19	Staff = 54
	Asian/Pac. Isl. = 11	45-54 = 65	Some grad = 9	Admin. = 69
	Other = 5	55-64 = 70	MA/equiv. = 61	Employer = 19
		65+ = 3	Doctorate = 99	Parent = 4
				Alumni = 18
				Other = 2

Table 1. Participant characteristics of task force-led focus groups

Gender	Race/Ethnicity
Male = 93	Caucasian = 129
Female = 56	Hispanic = 9
	African Amer. = 4
	Asian/Pac. Isl. = 5
	Other = 2

Table 2. Participant characteristics of student-led focus groups

How were data analyzed?

Quantitative data were analyzed by determining the cross-tabulations for each survey item across each constituency group. Each survey question represented a learning goal and was rated on a four-point scale. Ratings of 3.0 indicate that a goal was viewed as "important." A rating of 4 indicates that participants saw the goal as "essential." A table for each item was constructed that identified the number of participants who rated the item as "Not related (1)", "Helpful (2)", "Important (3)," and "Essential (4)." As an example, Table 3 represents how each constituency group responded to the survey question, "Students who obtain an NIU baccalaureate degree will exhibit information and quantitative literacy." In addition, an overall average was assigned to each item.

	Student	Faculty	Staff	Admin.	Alumni	Employer	Parent	Comm. College	Overall average
Not related	1.2% (5)	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	
Helpful	9.2% (39)	4.7% (6)	5.9% (5)	0.0%	5.5% (8)	8.7% (11)	0.0%	0.0%	
Important	45.7% (193)	35.7% (46)	51.8% (44)	48.0% (12)	40.4% (59)	36.2% (46)	33.3% (5)	32.1% (18)	
Essential	43.8% (185)	59.7% (77)	42.4% (36)	52.0% (13)	54.1% (79)	55.1% (70)	66.7% (10)	67.9% (38)	
Rating average	3.32	3.55	3.36	3.52	3.49	3.46	3.67	3.68	3.42

Table 3. Example of importance ratings by constituency group for survey item #1 "Exhibit information and quantitative literacy."

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Qualitative data¹ included focus group reports and narrative responses to the online survey. The qualitative data analysis was conducted using a “grounded coding process” (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Lofland et al., 2005) wherein data are sorted into meaningful categories, which emerge from the data itself. The researcher takes notes on the data, giving each note a label and working definition. The labels themselves are called “codes.” HyperRESEARCH software was used to facilitate this coding process.

Data files were converted into text files so they could be read by HyperRESEARCH. Then, data were coded using the software. The Codebook (Appendix D) represents the results of the open coding phase, where data were coded broadly. As more complex code maps were constructed, three core themes emerged. These were common threads that cut across different skills described by the subjects.

What were the results?

Quantitative results

Overall and individual item ratings, summarized in Table 4, indicate strong support for the proposed learning goals. Overall ratings showed that 22 of 24 learning goals were rated as important. Only two goals (Understand and articulate the significance of the arts, Understand how cultures and societies develop) were rated below 3.0 (2.7 and 2.9, respectively). Goals rated above 3.5 include: Access and critically use various information sources (3.5); Demonstrate written and oral English competence (3.8); Use critical thought and action (3.7); Follow ethical reasoning and action (3.6); Use inquiry, critical, and creative thinking skills (3.7); Develop the foundation and skills for life-long learning (3.6); Demonstrate teamwork and problem solving (3.6); and Understand the intellectual processes, perspectives, and methodologies implicit in one’s major (3.6).

By and large, constituency groups agreed in their importance ratings. There were few, if any, meaningful differences between groups. For example, the ratings for “Demonstrate written and oral English competence” ranged from 3.7 – 3.9 across all groups. Similarly, “use critical thought and action” resulted in ratings from 3.6 – 3.8.

¹ Qualitative data analysis was conducted by Professor Kristen Meyers, NIU Department of Sociology.

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	Overall	Students N = 424	Faculty N = 129	Staff N = 85	Admin. N = 25	Employers N = 127	Alumni N = 146	Comm. Coll. N = 56	Parents N = 15
Exhibit information and quantitative literacy	3.4	3.3	3.6	3.4	3.5	3.5	3.5	3.7	3.7
Access and critically use various information sources	3.5	3.4	3.7	3.5	3.6	3.6	3.5	3.8	3.7
Demonstrate written and oral English competence	3.8	3.7	3.9	3.8	3.9	3.9	3.9	3.9	3.9
Understand and articulate the significance of the arts	2.7	2.7	3.1	2.9	2.9	2.3	2.6	3.1	2.6
Unite theory, criticism, and practice in speaking and writing	3.4	3.3	3.3	3.4	3.7	3.3	3.4	3.6	3.7
Use critical thought and action	3.7	3.6	3.8	3.7	3.8	3.7	3.7	3.8	3.7
Demonstrate civic knowledge and engagement	3.3	3.3	3.4	3.4	3.2	2.9	3.2	3.4	3.2
Follow ethical reasoning and action	3.6	3.6	3.7	3.6	3.6	3.8	3.7	3.8	3.7
Exhibit vocational readiness	3.2	3.4	2.9	3.3	3.2	3.3	3.3	3.2	3.1
Know and understand the natural world	3.0	2.9	3.2	3.0	3.1	2.7	2.9	3.1	3.0
Understand the scientific method	3.0	2.8	3.3	3.0	3.1	2.8	2.8	3.1	3.1
Demonstrate global awareness and environmental sensitivity	3.1	3.1	3.3	3.3	3.3	2.9	3.0	3.4	3.1
Appreciate sustainable resources	3.1	3.1	3.1	3.2	3.0	2.9	2.9	3.2	3.1
Exhibit intercultural knowledge	3.2	3.1	3.3	3.3	3.4	3.1	3.1	3.5	3.1
Demonstrate multicultural sensitivity	3.4	3.3	3.3	3.6	3.4	3.5	3.3	3.5	3.3
Understand how societies and cultures develop	2.9	2.9	3.1	3.1	3.1	2.7	2.9	3.1	2.9
Appreciate cultural heritage, traditions, and ideas that have shaped societies and civilizations	3.0	3.1	3.3	3.2	3.2	2.8	2.9	3.2	3.1
Use inquiry, critical, and creative thinking skills	3.7	3.6	3.9	3.8	3.8	3.8	3.8	3.9	3.5
Appreciate the interrelatedness of various disciplines	3.2	3.2	3.2	3.3	3.2	3.3	3.3	3.2	3.2
Engage big questions	3.1	3.2	3.2	3.0	3.1	3.2	3.1	3.0	3.1
Develop the foundation and skills for life-long learning	3.6	3.6	3.7	3.7	3.6	3.6	3.7	3.7	3.5
Demonstrate teamwork and problem solving	3.6	3.6	3.4	3.8	3.4	3.9	3.7	3.7	3.7
Understand the intellectual processes, perspectives, and methodologies implicit in one's major	3.6	3.7	3.7	3.6	3.5	3.5	3.6	3.6	3.7
Appreciate creative forms of production	3.1	3.1	3.0	3.2	3.0	3.0	3.1	3.0	2.9

Table 4: Online survey results—overall and by constituency group

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Qualitative results

Qualitative data analysis indicated broad agreement between constituency groups. Faculty, staff, students, and administrators voiced similar concerns and made similar suggestions. These groups reported that they would like to see key skill sets developed through the baccalaureate degree. Three core themes emerged from the data analysis that tied the various levels together. These themes were critical thinking, communication, and context. These themes will hereafter be referred to as the "Three Cs." (see Figure 9). These goals are meant to have broad applicability across majors and co-curricular activities.

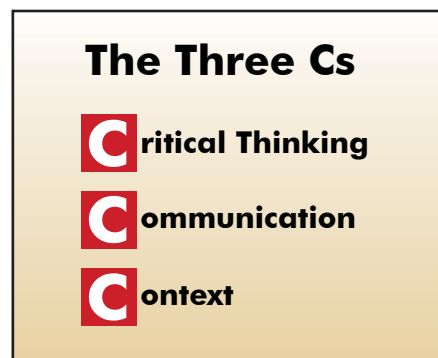


Figure 9. Proposed Baccalaureate Goals

Critical thinking was the most cited goal among the subjects. Critical thinking involves the following: literacy, reflectivity, and understanding how to gather and make sense of various forms of information. Each aspect of critical thinking is described here. Many courses at NIU could be used to promote critical thinking. Examples include, but are not limited to, courses in chemistry, economics, education, engineering, geology, health sciences, mathematics, physics, and psychology.

Literacy: Although generally defined as being able to read and write, literacy is much more encompassing. Literate graduates are those who not only can read, but do read. They understand the content of what they read, as well as what they write. As one survey subject wrote, graduates should know "How to read, analyzing and understand[ing] what they read." A staff member wrote, "NIU students should be able to READ critically, WRITE clearly, and generally COMMUNICATE effectively." A graduate student wrote that students should "WRITE, WRITE, WRITE—By the completion of a degree, every student should be reading and comprehending high-level literature/texts within their major."

A faculty member nicely summed up the concept of literacy as such:

[Graduates should] be able to identify the characteristics of a piece of art, music or literature according to its historical period; to be able to read and understand major journals of politics and economics like THE NATION, ATLANTIC MONTHLY, etc.; to be able to read and understand the professional journals in their major; to be able to evaluate the truth content of arguments and claims; to be able to write and speak cogently and stylishly; and to be able to understand the issues at stake in ethical or political problems and controversies.

Reflectivity: Reflective graduates are able to recognize their own strengths and weaknesses: "They ought to critically know themselves, and understand that they don't know things," said one group of faculty. They must "think for themselves." Reflective graduates "Question what they believe and take a strong stand," according to another group of faculty. One faculty focus group said that students must "Learn to learn and unlearn, realize that learning is a cycle." Thus, reflective students do not just learn; they reflect on what their new-found knowledge means to them. They develop a sense of personal pride in acquiring knowledge. As one group of faculty said, reflective students get beyond asking, "Is this going to be on the exam?" Instead of focusing on grades, they begin to want to go to class, read, and take notes because the information is important to them.

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Information skills: Graduates should know how to find quality information. This is one of the most important things that NIU students should learn, according to the participants. Faculty said that students must “Develop research skills; obtain information to make decisions; evaluate information.” Students must know how to decipher good information from bad. A group of staff members said, they must be able to “Distinguish among legitimate and suspect sources of information.” They need library skills in order to find information. They should not rely so heavily on Google and Wikipedia. As one subject said, graduates should “Read and understand substantial and possibly complex documents (as opposed to living in a world of factoids and sound-bites).”

Graduates should not only know how to find quality information, they should also know how to process data analytically and use mathematical language and methods and scientific methods when appropriate. As one group of employers said, NIU graduates should be able to “Quickly assess data, draw conclusions, and act upon it.”

When thinking critically about information, people should ask questions and be skeptical about the answers. They should not take information “at face value.” One subject wrote,

NIU students should be able to apply critical thinking to any problem, and they should respect the ideas and cultures of others in order to achieve (or arrive at) common societal goals. They should use reasoned thought and learning in lieu of blind allegiance and ignorance.

Literacy, reflectivity, and information skills form the basis of critical thinking. Critical thinkers understand the consequences of their choices and take risks. They develop intellectual curiosity and become stakeholders in the educational process. Figure 10 provides a graphic representation of these aspects of critical thinking.

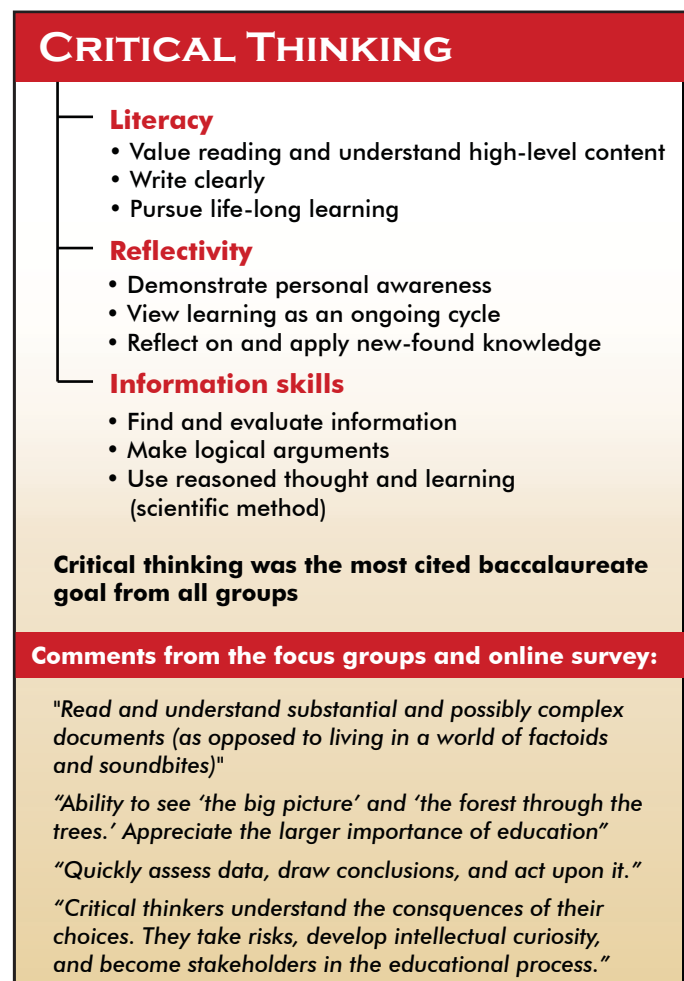


Figure 10. Critical Thinking

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Communication is a central concept, highly valued by faculty, staff, students, and employers. One faculty member said, “One of the primary goals should be that students who graduate with a baccalaureate degree should be able to communicate their thoughts.” Another subject wrote, “We want them to find out about what they don’t know, to be able to express themselves clearly, and to interact with the rest of the world in a thoughtful manner.”

Communication hinges upon the mastery of basic skills such as language, technology, and collaboration. These aspects will be discussed here. Many courses at NIU could be used to promote communication. Examples include, but are not limited to, courses in art, communications, computer science, English, foreign languages, music, and technology.

Language: Graduates should master the English language, which is a skill set that most participants thought was lacking. The students themselves thought there should be a stronger foundation in English writing, and that introductory courses should be more challenging.

Employers and faculty stressed the importance of basic English competency, which they defined as spelling, grammar, and punctuation. As one group of employers said, “Rudimentary elements of communication have been lost.” One employer in that group said, “I don’t have time to teach people how to write a sentence and a paragraph, yet I find myself having to do that.”

Subjects also expected graduates to communicate professionally, avoiding “text-speak” and other slang in their interactions. They must also master non-verbal communication as well as verbal communication.

In addition to mastering English, subjects thought that graduates should be able to communicate in foreign languages. One faculty member asserted that “Everyone who graduates from a university should have a foreign language. This is critical in this era of globalization.” The importance of foreign language was mentioned repeatedly in the survey.

Technology: Communication frequently requires the use of technology. As such, graduates need technological skills for facilitating communication. As one subject wrote, graduates need:

A solid understanding of how to write, speak, and convey messages effectively in various forms/ mediums is extremely important. It is also very important for students to be very well-rounded and have a wide range of experiences and skill sets so that they are indispensable in the workplace and society in general.

A group of employers agreed, saying that graduates need “Technology tools beyond email and that includes MS Office Suite.”

At the same time, subjects recognized that some technologies are more effective than others, and that communication may be suffering by our heavy dependence on technologies. As a staff member wrote:

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[Students must be able to] Function without an iPod, texting, or constantly surfing the Internet—they need to be able to engage in person to person communication again. As I heard on the radio several months ago—we have a generation of people who move through life facing forward—they prefer to not interact on a personal level but through artificial means except on a superficial level.

Collaboration: Being able to work well in a team is becoming increasingly important in work environments. As one individual wrote:

It's not so important for a college graduate to be a trained professional as it is to be given the ability to rapidly assimilate a scenario related to their field of study, as well as to be able to converse intellectually with those outside of their field and work effectively in tandem with such people in order to maximize the benefits of team work.

Collaboration, or “team work,” depends upon successful communication. Participants including faculty and students called for an increased emphasis on group work in NIU courses to better prepare graduates.

Of course, in order to collaborate effectively, graduates should be able to listen as well as speak. As one group of employers said, “Being able to hear what people are saying is critical...[as is the] ability to work with people who we don't agree with.”

Overall, participants recognized that graduates' communication skills reflect directly on NIU, making us all stakeholders in ensuring strong communication of our students and graduates:

[Students should] represent Northern in an impressive manner. Students who cannot write or speak properly will go out into the workforce and represent Northern in that manner. I have had numerous applicants for employment from NIU who portrayed the university terribly.

A faculty member summed up the ideal communication skills in this way:

Our graduates should be able to sit at any silver-laden dinner table, or assembly plant cafeteria, and be able to conduct meaningful exchanges with the people who sit across from them.

Figure 11 represents the aspects and potential student learning goals related to the theme of communication.

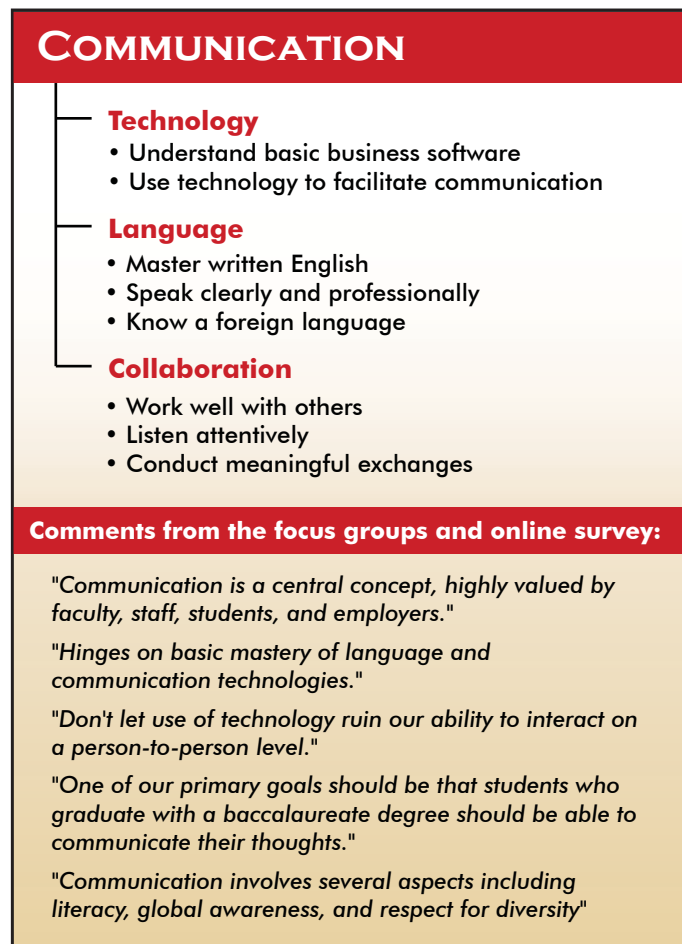


Figure 11. Communication

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Context involves what we know and what we do with that knowledge. It is affected by the world around us. That is, our knowledge is contextual. For students to understand context, they need familiarity with history and its impact on modern society, the relationship between our society and others around the globe, and the interactions among diverse cultures within our own society. Being aware of context fosters graduates' sense of responsibility. Each aspect of "context" is explained subsequently. Many courses at NIU could be used to promote understanding of context. Examples include, but are not limited to, courses in anthropology, Black studies, history, music, political science, psychology, sociology, theater, and women's studies.

Historical Context: To make sense of today's world, we have to look to our past. Our graduates should be able to use history to understand the present. As one survey subject wrote:

We should want them to be able to CONTEXTUALIZE issues and problems, to understand them as new episodes in a continuing story.

Graduates need a working knowledge of major social systems such as the economy, government, family, and the ways that they have and will change over time. As one survey subject wrote,

[We want students to] function with a well-rounded experience in both education and exploration of themselves. Educated both in economic and scientific practices. Connect the dots between "now" and the "future."

Another survey subject wrote, "These students need to have an understanding of the world as a whole. Such categories include the history, the political process and its importance and the arts that contribute to broadening horizons." They need to know current events, informed by the historical events that preceded them. Interdisciplinary approaches were recommended by many.

Global Context: NIU graduates should be able to place events in a global context and recognize the interconnections between the United States and other nations. One faculty focus group said,

We want our student to look at society as a global society; foreign language courses should be taught that provide connections to Japan and China. The "role of industry" is important to the undergraduate experience.

One survey subject said that graduates need to understand that "the U.S. is not the center of the universe." A different group of faculty said:

Graduates should have an understanding of America's role in the world. Additionally [they should] understand that there are different perspectives with regard to these and many other questions.

Graduates should develop an understanding and appreciation for the complexities of living in a diverse society. As one survey subject said, graduates should "Understand the complex interdependence among people across diverse geographic locations." Several subjects used the catch-phrase, "Think globally; act locally."

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Diversity: Because the U.S.—indeed, the NIU campus—is a “melting pot” of different cultures, graduates need to be able to respect differences. As many participants explained, diversity is a broad category. It includes race and ethnicity, gender, sexuality, age, disability, and economic differences. Diversity in the United States is obviously linked to global diversity. As one faculty group said:

Students should learn a sense of diversity...Students need to learn to respect other cultures. They need to understand how to live in a global society.

Students should learn to understand their own privileges and limitations. As one survey subject wrote:

NIU students should leave school with a broader understanding of people different than themselves. Acceptance of others different than ourselves starts with learning and first-hand experience.

One faculty group said that graduates can learn to be allies to those who are less privileged. The subjects thought that NIU’s curriculum should reflect diverse experiences.

Responsibility: Once students understand the importance of context, they will develop a sense of individual responsibility. Participants thought that students should learn to take responsibility for their own actions. As one survey respondent wrote:

I want this generation to start doing things for themselves. They need to stop relying on others to do it for them and to stop thinking that they should get whatever they want. This country was not built on getting your own way but on hard work, compromise and bettering oneself, for the benefit of the individual and the world as a whole.

A group of faculty said, “Students should learn that thinking hard about a problem is a good thing, and to appreciate the value of hard work.” Another faculty group saw the need for students to “Learn self-initiative, learn to take action on their own, and learn to be accountable for their actions.”

Participants also thought that graduates should demonstrate a sense of responsibility to their communities. For example, one group of employers wanted students to realize “I am part of a larger picture. It is not all about me.” They explained that they want students to:

Be aware of cause and effect, social responsibility. With changes happening as fast as they are occurring now, how does a team react to it? [They need to know the importance of] civic engagement; how business affects the area they are in.

The notion that NIU graduates should “give back” to society was very important for most of the participants. As one individual wrote,

We want students to leave and apply principles and tools they have learned to the bigger issues and challenges we, as human beings face. We want these students also to be able to understand and assist with preserving history, our earth, as well as different cultures and subcultures within our nation and the world.

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When graduates give back to society, they take responsibility for the world around them. They build a work ethic, leadership skills, and life skills. One subject wrote that:

An NIU graduate should be a contributing member of society who is willing to help and further others. Take action and stand by for what they believe in and cry freedom. Represent NIU, and help contribute to others.

Responsible graduates will be productive citizens. As one survey subject wrote, graduates should “enter into society as productive citizens—that is, individuals who are equipped with the basic skills (literacy) and knowledge (of history, democracy, culture) necessary to make a difference in their communities.”

Figure 12 represents the aspects and potential student learning goals related to the theme of context.



Figure 12. Context

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Future Directions

We encourage the university community to embrace this moment in history. NIU needs to ensure that the baccalaureate curriculum provides a meaningful experience. Students should be prepared to address the challenges they will face upon graduation as well as in the future.

Baccalaureate education is the responsibility of all NIU faculty, staff, administrators, and students, themselves. We are charged with the responsibility to prepare graduates for the future. The online survey and focus group data provide strong support for establishing the “Three Cs” as the foundation for NIU’s baccalaureate student-learning goals. We want to give students a unique NIU experience focused upon mastery of critical thinking, communication skills, and understanding context (i.e., historical, global, societal). Students’ majors should reflect these goals and be included in each program’s student learning objectives. This poses the question of how majors will support the baccalaureate goals and the challenges that will need to be addressed.

The Three Cs as potential baccalaureate goals are hereby presented to the university community. We ask you to imagine how NIU would look if we all agreed on these as essential baccalaureate goals and worked to ensure that students reach them. The task force acknowledges that change is difficult. There will likely be potholes along the way and reform is an evolutionary process. To develop a signature baccalaureate curriculum and associated general education program requires that we accept these challenges. We encourage the university community to continue collaboration and work toward creating a more meaningful and goal-driven baccalaureate education.

In closing, we acknowledge that the proposed learning goals will require further review and discussion. They are presented here as tentative yet reflective of what was said. They will be discussed and refined during the Fall 2009 semester and subsequently offered to university governance for approval. If the goals are endorsed, future task force activities will likely include the following:

- Develop measureable student learning goals and objectives
- Identify potential assessment strategies
- Review teaching practices, supports, and reward structures
- Consider strategies to integrate general education and baccalaureate goals with the major
- Discuss how the general education program is managed.

If you are interested in learning more about the university’s baccalaureate review process and general education reform, please go to the Baccalaureate Review Home Page (www.niu.edu/bacreview/index.shtml). This site contains a variety of reports, readings, and links to other universities doing similar work.

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